Special Issue Cultural Analysis: Comparison as Social and Cultural Practice

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COMPARISON AS SOCIAL AND COMPARATIVE PRACTICE

GUEST EDITORS: STEFAN GROTH

Cover image: **Crachoir as a material artefact of comparisons**. Coronette—Modern Crachoir Design: A crachoir is used in wine tastings to spit out wine, thus being able to compare a range of different wines while staying relatively sober. © Julia Jacot / EESAB Rennes

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Guest Editor
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Introduction: Comparison as Social and Cultural Practice

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Comparisons are everyday practices used for making sense of social roles and encounters, socioeconomic transformation processes, and uncertain futures. By comparing oneself with others, practices, statuses, and worldviews are put into context and embedded in broader frames of meaning. In times of change and risk, comparisons reduce complexity and offer a clearer orientation. For a long time, the humanities and social sciences have used comparisons as methodological and analytical tools (Eggan 1954; Gingrich and Fox 2002; Schnegg 2014). Such scholarly practices of comparing have since been criticized for furthering inequalities, reproducing problematic categories, or presupposing bounded entities of comparison (i.e., "holistic cultures," which can be compared with each other, evolutionism being a prime example). Newer approaches seek to address such problems and propose ethnographic "thick comparisons" (Scheffer and Niewöhner 2010) or a focus on "practices of comparison" (Deville, Guggenheim, and Hrdličková 2016a). Such scholarly forms of comparison as methodological or analytic practice—that is, how scientists or scholars (Deville, Guggenheim, and Hrdličková 2016b) go about comparing (from a science studies perspective)—exist besides "emic" forms of comparison (Sørensen, Marlin, and Niewöhner 2018) or "comparisons in the wild" (Amelang and Beck 2010), that is, comparison as everyday practice enacted not (only) by scientists but by virtually everybody in specific life-worlds. The articles in this special issue deal with such emic comparisons in everyday contexts.[1] Focusing on comparison not as an analytic tool but as an everyday social and cultural practice, they shed light on subjective perspectives and on what individuals (and groups) do when they compare and how they do it—from subtle to crude forms of comparison, from informal and spontaneous comparisons to institutionalized comparative regimes, from tacit modes of comparing to refined categories and systems of comparison.

With this focus, the articles aim at contributing to current debates by highlighting specific and situated practices of comparison in everyday contexts. Authors explore and tease out the limits of comparison (on epistemological and on analytic levels) and shed light on comparative practices from the perspective of European ethnology and neighboring disciplines. This special issue brings together contributions on comparisons as social and cultural practice from different fields: from the field of work in international contexts (Helena Petterson, Katarzyna Wolanik Boström, and Magnus Öhlander), from migration and transnational spaces (Pihla Siim), from political processes on protest and climate change (Valeska Flor), and from the sphere of leisure

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and recreational sport (Stefan Groth). It asks for grounding comparative practices in everyday life, for the role of comparisons in making sense of transformations and differences, and for different elements, modes, and theorizations of comparison. Contributions deal with (among other aspects) how comparisons are part of narratives, how they are mediatized in popular culture, how they consist of implicit and explicit elements, how they mediate between different worldviews and perceptions, and which material, quantitative, symbolic, or affective dimensions they have.

Although practices of comparing entail both cognitive and communicative dimensions, the articles focus on the latter as observable processes. Broadly speaking, approaches to social comparison as psychological or mental processes (Festinger 1954; Mares 2008) are outside the thematic purview of this issue. Instead, the contributions seek to connect to debates on comparisons as practices and performances (Deville, Guggenheim, and Hrdličková 2016a; Heintz 2010; Herzfeld 2001; M'charek 2008) observable through ethnographic approaches. While this includes forms of comparisons that are partly implicit and not always communicatively explicated, essays ask how comparisons are enacted, communicated, and negotiated: which practices can be observed, which material dimensions do they have? What effects can comparisons have in everyday situations? How are implicit dimensions of comparison connected to explicit elements and materializations?

Everyday comparisons are closely related to the production of difference or processes of distinction—phenomena so broad and encompassing that for the purpose of this issue, a definition of comparison was needed to avoid arbitrary notions. This does not mean that the articles entail declarations of how observed comparisons are different from forms of distinction, the production of differences, or juxtapositions, nor does it presuppose a narrow understanding of what comparisons are and are not. Instead, a broad working definition or understanding of comparison was agreed on to ensure a somewhat shared basis of papers and compatibility to current debates on comparison (see Heintz 2016; Scheffer and Niewöhner 2008). Essays are based on the shared understanding that comparisons entail more than one phenomenon and assume a certain degree of likeness of phenomena, such as belonging to the same or comparable category. At the same time, they observe a difference between the phenomena. This difference depends on a *tertium comparations* as the criterium (or set of criteria) of comparison.

Contributions in this Volume

With such a minimal definition as a starting point, contributors engage with comparison as social and cultural practice in a range of different fields. In the first essay, Helena Pettersson, Katarzyna Wolanik Boström, and Magnus Öhlander show how comparisons are used by medical professionals and scholars to make sense of international mobility. Based on interviews with Swedish medical professionals and scholars in Swedish humanities, their work analyzes comparative sense-making in intercultural settings and the interplay between professional and everyday contexts. The cases discussed illustrate how comparisons feature in acculturation processes and are used to deal with new experiences.

Pihla Maria Siim explores how Estonian families who moved to Finland make use of comparisons to situate themselves in a new environment and how they can function as strategic resources to negotiate different "modes of being-at-home." The article looks at how implicit and explicit comparisons feature in the negotiation of identities and values and how broader social debates are mirrored in personalized comparative narratives.

In the third essay, Valeska Flor analyzes the role comparisons play in political processes, using the example of debates on climate change in Germany. Flor shows the different and layered instances of comparisons in this field and illustrates how they are used in arguing for political projects and to negotiate guilt and responsibility between different sets of actors. Specifically, the article sheds light on how language features in comparisons to differentiate between levels of plausibility and credibility: whose judgments can be trusted? Who is—or should be—allowed to decide in debates? By looking at intertwined comparisons in climate change debates, Flor renders visible the interplay of factual arguing and strategic communicative behavior as a central facet of this contested topic.

The article by Stefan Groth focuses on different elements of comparison in recreational road cycling. Based on a research project on orientations toward the middle, he shows how athletes make use of comparisons to relate to other cyclists and situate themselves and their performances in a competitive field. The essay shows how explicit reflections about performances and results, and affective and anticipatory practices affect competitive orientations of cyclists. Central to this is how knowledge and estimations about others are evaluated in different sets of comparisons and how this influences comparative constellations.

The issue concludes with a response by Dorothy Noyes. Altogether, articles offer insights into comparative constellations in specific everyday contexts. By referring to a shared but broad notion of comparison, a common ground for debate is ensured while divergent criteria and case-specific configurations are not precluded. Instead, the articles highlight the breadth of comparative constellations and their various uses and functions in specific life-worlds. This special issue and its contributions accordingly illustrate both the prevalence and importance of comparisons in the everyday.

Notes

1 This special issue is based on a panel on "Comparison as Social and Cultural Practice" at the Fourteenth Congress of the International Society for Ethnology and Folklore (SIEF) in Santiago de Compostela in 2019, jointly organized by Markus Tauschek and Stefan Groth.

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Practice and Knowledge "Over There" and "Here": A Cultural Analysis of How Mobile Highly Skilled Professionals Create Meaning With Comparison as a Tool

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Abstract
Comparison is a way to make sense of reality, e.g., by contrasting places, "cultures," or practices. It may present different degrees of something, create a dichotomy, and imply a hierarchy of values. The article analyzes how comparison as a tool is used by highly skilled Swedish professionals when they talk about participating in international work mobility and their subsequent return to Sweden. Empirically, the analysis is based on 46 interviews with Swedish medical professionals and 30 interviews with scholars in Swedish Humanities.

Keywords: high-skilled labor migrationm, Sweden, mobility, comparison

Understanding the world through comparisons is an everyday act all humans are practicing. In this article, we analyze how two groups of highly skilled Swedish professionals use comparisons in order to sort out their choices, aims, and impression of international mobility. We focus on narratives about embodiment and interviewees' experiences when perceiving changes that happen through geographical movements between different physical places and between national borders. The overall aim is to present a cultural analysis of how professionals create meaning with comparison as a tool. The specific aim is to synthesize earlier studies of mobility among medical professionals and scholars within the humanities (see, e.g., Pettersson, Wolanik Boström and Öhlander 2015; Wolanik Boström 2018; Öhlander, Wolanik Boström and Pettersson 2019), and to analyze how the two interviewed groups use comparisons to organize their understanding of their stays abroad and return to Sweden. It might be "Swedish" ways of doing things compared to other ways, or academic systems with different demands on mobility and internationalization. We discuss how the interviewees make use of comparison, what different types of comparisons are made, and what momentum they create.

In the following, we will start with an outline of comparison as a practice of every-

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day life. We will then present how comparison in our material could be understood as a way of organizing and understanding aspects of mobility intersecting work life and private life. We focus on three themes: risk-taking and safety, family life, and "home" and abroad.

Comparisons as a Practice of Everyday Life

In classical anthropological literature, we have many examples of comparisons and how comparisons are used in order to create the world for the anthropologist, for example, building archetypes through comparisons, with descriptions of black and white situations. On the other hand, some comparisons are not precise, with few contrasting elements (Lévi-Strauss 1969; see Candea 2007; Ehn and Löfgren 2001; Ehn, Löfgren and Wilk 2015).

Comparison as everyday practice is a cultural phenomenon and aims at, e.g., understanding and evaluating, but also for self-improvement. By conducting comparisons, we can create meaning, sort out information flows, and make interpretations on how the world is constituted. To make comparisons is a fundamental cultural process in which we, as humans, distinguish between things and phenomena and relate to them, both in the past and present. Comparisons are a well-used tool to make sense of reality, e.g., describing places and cultures as interconnected and contrasting them to other places and cultures (Wolanik Boström and Öhlander 2015, 7). Furthermore, comparisons may make sense of different degrees of the same phenomenon but may also be used to create dichotomies (Miegel and Schoug 1998, 14). In both cases, they imply a hierarchy—something is "more" or "less," "better," or "worse" than something else.

Comparison can also help to understand (non)existing differences and as a tool to sort things out. We use comparison as a strategy to make the depicted world more understandable, e.g., related to the understanding of bodies, phenomena, materiality, and narratives. In the same way, comparisons may be used in order to understand certain positions, practices, and values. Comparisons can work as a marker for choices and for choosing the "right" thing. They are acts of confirmation and corroboration, serve as motivation and incentive, justification and vindication, and rationalization and clarification. To make comparisons thus creates order and sorts things out. With comparison as a method, categories can be created, and the world can be organized, e.g., in dichotomies or equalizers. We focus here on different modes, forms, and purposes of comparison. In our previous articles about highly skilled mobility, we have used Pierre Bourdieu's notion of capital: cultural, academic, and symbolic capital. Bourdieu's concepts are one example of how comparisons have been theorized and developed into an analytical framework with conceptual tools (Bourdieu 1984; 1988).

Comparison as a strategy often results in dichotomies, i.e., a conceptual dualism, organizing things in different (binary) categories, or splitting a category into two subcategories (Miegel and Schoug 1998:14; Wolanik Boström and Öhlander 2015:12). As mentioned above, it also quickly results in hierarchies: one component is, at least implicitly, regarded as "better" in some way. In our material, what is perceived as "Swedish" work life and family life if often presented as the well-known, secure, well-functioning—though sometimes maybe a bit dull, schematic and organized—, as opposed to the extraordinary, adventurous, and exciting—though more dangerous or old-style —during the stay abroad.

From a cultural analysis perspective, we understand humans as maintainers and facilitators of values and ideas, practices, and skills, both as professionals and in private. Comparisons can be defined as an everyday and active method for humans to actively create and re-create culture. With comparisons, old and new experiences define and challenge peoples' experiences, as well as thought styles, practices, and lived lives. In everyday culture, there are ongoing negotiations on how to define the world. In this article, we try to understand how our interviewees do that in terms of comparisons, to form, compare, and motivate their career choices, and how comparisons relate to their private lives.

Comparison—as a method of understanding culture as opposites—is central in our lives and research, but it is also strongly criticized. In our text, we have chosen to highlight two domains, namely everyday life and research. Here, thus, we use the perspective of cultural analysis as it provides the ability to analyze how similarities and differences in people's experiences, views, and values affect their ability to understand and collaborate through a phenomenological approach.

Data

Our point of departure is 46 in-depth interviews with Swedish medical professionals and 30 in-depth interviews with Swedish humanities scholars. In the former group, physicians work in international charity organizations in the Global South, specialized physicians involved in research and clinical practice going abroad to other Western clinics and research centers, and medical molecular biologists. Among the humanities scholars, there are historians, philosophers, and Romance language scholars. All these professionals took their medical exams or Ph.D. in Sweden and lived and worked in Sweden before their stay abroad.

The 3-year study of the scholars in the humanities is at the time writing still running and is an offspring from the 3-year project on the medical professionals. The interview-samples of medical professions only included those who have been abroad for longer or shorter work stays, while the sample of professionals in the humanities included both persons with and without experiences of longer or shorter work stays abroad.[1] The physicians/medical researchers and molecular biologists went to other countries in 'the West' (e.g., United States, France, Australia, the United Kingdom) while physicians who took assignments for international aid organizations worked in countries in Africa, Asia, and South America. While not all of the humanities scholars did spend more extended periods working abroad, all of them regularly attended conferences in different parts of the world. Some of them also had international collaborations with colleagues who could include shorter visits to other countries. Others had spent time as postdocs in other countries, as participants in teaching exchange programs, or were visiting researchers.

Interviews were based on open-ended questionnaires and focused on work-life and practices of internationalization (e.g., postdocs, assignments, exchange programs, meetings, conferences), with a special emphasis on new knowledge and insights gathered from working abroad for a limited time. Themes included the process of moving abroad, the stay there, and the subsequent return to Sweden. However, the interviewee was allowed to freely develop and/or go in-depth on themes they considered to be important from their own experience. Interviews were conducted in Swedish, digitally recorded, and transcribed verbatim. Quotes in this text have therefore been translated to English with minor revisions for better readability. All interviewee names are pseudonyms. Interviews followed the guidelines for research and ethics for the Swedish Research Council.

We wish to bring together cultural comparisons from work, family life, and leisure "over there" and "here" with the cases presented here. The "over there" refers to the place where the interviewee conducted research abroad, and the "here" refers to Sweden upon return. Interviewees used such or very similar expressions when referring to places abroad as "over there" or their home country as "here." The use of "over there" and "here" was also an easy distinction for the interviewees to make, to be able to sort their experiences out, and to compare and distinguish.

Comparisons and Hierarchies

The knowledge systems our interviewees inhabit in their everyday professional work is, by definition, a system of comparisons, both among the group of researchers in medicine and the humanities, but also among the medical doctors. The groups in our studies are part of a more extensive system with institutionalized comparison regimes. During the last years, the number of different types of ranking systems for universities has risen, with such actors as the *Times Higher Education* and the *Shanghai Index*. There is also a constant discussion on how to compare different journals, citations, merits and publication types, expertise levels, not to mention the collected data and experimental or methodological settings in itself. This is also the case for university hospitals and medical schools (see, for example, Stack 2016; Soh 2017). A central part of the university is to try, testify, compare, problematize, falsify, and confirm. All these actions are based on comparisons. They aim to understand and/or explain phenomena of nature, technology, culture, and society through scientific arguments and results (de Rijcke 2016; Hammarfelt and de Rijcke 2015; Hammarfelt et al. 2016). As researchers enter the global arena for higher education and move abroad, there are immediate mechanisms for comparisons. The very fact that you have decided to move physically from another space, from a particular institution and country to another country, is itself an act that is based on decisions derived from comparisons.

Further, higher education funding systems included acts of comparisons, where evaluators read, select, and compare different applications with each other, where projects are compared and, in the end, chosen for funding. Here, it is not only the research plan or research idea but also the merits and skills visible through CVs and publication lists. The entire academic world is indeed embedded with acts of comparisons and systems where comparisons are explicit. As a community in which merits are regarded as the most fundamental work objectives, there is a constant discussion about comparing different types of merits (Dussage, Helgesson, and Lee 2015). This includes gendered aspects of merits and how work-life and gender expectations affect academic productivity (Aiston and Jung 2015).

Added to this, we may also keep in mind the influence of new public management regarding research output and management steering. Academics have been living with different types of evaluation systems for a long time, and thus, comparisons are a method of understanding everyday life, not only actual work processes. With the act of comparing academic systems comes the idea of "the west and the rest." As shown in several studies, it is vital for researchers to cooperate and publish with researchers in different parts of the world to gain more citations. Researchers who cooperate and publish with researchers from different continents have a broader range of citations, spread out on different continents (Leisyte 2016; Oravec 2017; see Kreber and Hounsell 2014)

At the local level, different indicators measure up the researcher's productivity and merits. Since the so-called autonomy reform, it is up to each university to create indicators and measurement tools in Sweden. However, universities also know that they need to relate to, if not apply and completely follow, the international rankings and measurements. The interviewees who are researchers are well aware of these tools but respond differently depending on their disciplinary background. Researchers in molecular biology, for example, are embedded in a global academic comparison system. This is also the case with the philosophers. The historians and researchers in Romance languages are aware that they are compared with and measured with a more science and medicine oriented ideal of being mobile. As for the medical doctors who are also researchers and the NGO doctors, their experience of being abroad is in Sweden compared with what they could have done while working in Sweden to enhance their career within the Swedish health system.

Mobility and Comparisons—a Reflexive Making of the Before-well-known Well-known Again

To be mobile and make comparisons may be considered a taken for granted procedure. There is something cohesive with the two concepts of comparisons and mobility. Mobility as idea and practice is the expectation to experience something "different" in the new place. The practice includes moving bodies between places. Thus, mobility per se is supposed to mean a change, and thus form a ground for comparisons. The taxonomy of the word mobility and the relationship with the word "movement" can thus be understood as an act of agency. It is a conscious undertaking to move the body from one place to another. In a recent article, Öhlander et al. (2019) discuss highly skilled professionals within medicine and the humanities, and their experiences of living in (at least) two different countries for professional reasons. Here, the move from Sweden to another country and then back again may imply an act of comparison (e.g., towards the lack of movement). The article discusses how their interviewees, upon return to Sweden, related to their time abroad through an analytical concept that we call "cultural jet-lag." The "cultural jet-lag" aims at the norms and values, and social and cultural experience a person brings with them upon return to their home country after being abroad for a longer time. The interviewees had what Öhlander et al. define as a cultural and social delay of both everyday values and work-situation and had to adjust.

What is unique with our data in relation to comparison is that the interviewees not only move from Sweden to a foreign country but also move back to Sweden. This creates a double type of comparison: interviewees not only make comparisons with their experience in Sweden and abroad but also when they have returned to Sweden. There is a change in individuals' geographic places and physical spaces, experiences, and interactions. Within work-life, there is an obvious comparison people make: the comparison of salaries and competences.

To move from one workplace to another internationally is also a choice, and to make a choice can also be considered a risk. For the groups we have studied, working abroad was an element of risk-taking in different ways. The actual gains—e.g., professional learning or higher merits—were grounded in concrete comparisons the groups dealt with. The interviewees reflected on their current Swedish research environment, which was able to maintain good quality. However, they had become mobile academics in order to strengthen their knowledge, e.g., to learn more about their specific research area from world-leading experts while being post-doctoral researchers, an important first career-step after the Ph.D. exam. The interviewees talked about curiosity and "adventure" alongside more rational explanations for choosing to move. Although it could economically and in terms of merits mean a setback compared to staying in Sweden, they were driven by a curious mind and striving to learn more.

Choosing to move from Sweden and (even temporarily) abandon the Swedish welfare system was considered to be a challenge, both for researchers and physicians. Several of the researchers we interviewed pointed out that the notion of the welfare systems security and the Swedish labor market employment logic are factors that prevent mobility, both at junior and senior levels. It requires a certain level of risk-taking, and even adventurousness says, for example, one of the molecular biologists. The idea of striving for the best research environment and being curious did not always match the ideal of security. There were challenges for the individuals who chose to be mobile, and they made constant comparisons and risk calculations on the benefits of staying in Sweden and being included in the Swedish welfare system. Examples were comparisons of health insurance, the pension system, etc. versus going abroad and working in a new environment with a much more vulnerable situation regarding social security, competence in that country's research funding system, and leaving friends and colleagues they know. The molecular biologist Sofie compares Sweden and Germany:

> It's a hassle, especially if you decide to have children while being abroad. I had one kid while being abroad and that is tough. In Sweden, you have the day-care system, subsidized by the government but in Germany…. Everything is so expensive, and the daycare center it is more like "child storage." No pedagogical program for the kids or

> pedagogical education among the staff.

Some interviewees compared and made risk-calculations through individual questions: What will happen if I leave, and what will happen if I do not go? The molecular biologists and the philosophers argued that staying in the Swedish system would create a risk for them not to be able to be competitive, to apply for attractive research positions, and research funding. To stay was safe, but in the long run, the short risk of moving abroad might pay off later in their career. The molecular biologist Clara argued that a move was necessary:

> I knew early on that I had to go for a post-doc abroad after my Ph.D. exam. Otherwise, I wouldn't be able to continue as a researcher. Of course, you want to start your own research group, but that is not possible without becoming independent as a researcher, and the post-doc is an important part of that.

In general, the group of scholars in history did not consider mobility as a necessary career choice. They also compared the gains of staying in Sweden to the actual risk of going abroad, where staying would increase the possibility of having temporary appointments as senior lecturers and thus, through Swedish work regulations and laws, after two years, become fully employed by the department.[2] However, one of the historians who had received a permanent position as a lecturer immediately after the Ph.D. exam considered the career as a researcher being in danger due to the permanent lecturing position. A permanent university teaching position within the Swedish university system includes 80% teaching and 20% competence development. Thus, you must apply for external research funding to be able to conduct research to a more considerable extent.

Some of the medical practitioners considered their time abroad as something that, in retrospect, risked their Swedish career. Several of them concluded when they came back to Sweden that their time abroad did not count. Going abroad was risky, and the effect was losing something instead of gaining something. On the contrary, the researchers in medical molecular biology and philosophy emphasized that they would be affected negatively if they were not part of an international research community through physical mobility, including experiences, merits, and networks from other academic workplaces (see Pettersson 2011).

To be both curious and "adventurous" were described as positive professional driving forces that created both breadth and depth in the profession – and, implicitly, contrasted them to the colleagues who lacked these characteristics. Some interviewees were aware that mobility could be a career risk, while it is necessary for the actual learning and development process as a researcher. In the field of bio/medical molecular biology, mobility after the public defense in the form of a postdoc position is considered central to being able to apply for new environments and thus to develop as a researcher:

> Jennie: Well, how else would I learn something new? I wanted to learn about new

> methods, and there was no one in Sweden who worked with it, but there were, for example, in Germany and the USA. So, in order to be able to develop as a researcher and learn the methods, I had to move!

Wanting to learn new methods and to develop one's scientific competence area directly depended on a more extended stay abroad, which required curiosity as well as risk-taking. The interviewees from molecular biology and philosophy compared Sweden with other countries with a larger number of inhabitants, universities, and state-of-the-art research environments. Sweden is a small country with a limited research infrastructure and with limited scientific platforms. The development of such infrastructure is thus a priority at the political level (Government Office 2020: 52). To be able to reflect on, compare, and seek out what the single individual would like to learn was presented as central.

Curiosity as the driving force for the mobility practice can then be discussed as a scientific virtue and professional foundation, but also it is selective. It must be integrated with an ability to compare, select and make risk-analysis. "I am a person driven by my curiosity," says the molecular biologist Steve, when describing his main motivation to go abroad. However, at the same time, the researchers are highlighting their career development and career motivations as well as curiosity when describing their motivations for moving abroad as post-docs; they are driven by both curiosity and the academic career system, especially in medicine.

The curiosity theme is regularly mentioned also by the physicians working for NGOs. Here, curiosity is also used as an alibi for the interest in gaining knowledge about other places. Monika, an NGO physician, says:

> What prompts me as well is my egoistic curiosity; I am so curious at how things truly are in different places in the world, how the culture works, how the people are. I will not stop travelling before… well, I cannot, because there are always new things that I am curious about.

The physicians who worked for international aid organizations used their wish to do some good in the world, curiosity, or being adventurous, as a means for comparison with the colleagues who—even with a pronounced interest in medical aid—still decided to stay at home. "Well, of course it was difficult, in the beginning there was no AC, nothing, just a fan and flies and lizards that walked right in, but in some way, I got used to it pretty quickly," says one physician about the situations while stationed abroad. In this group, the apparent risk-elements were the dangers of epidemics or military conflicts in places around the world where they were stationed, whereas the Swedish society was considered a very safe country.

Comparisons of Family Support and Gender Equality in Different Countries

To compare family support and gender equality are returning topics in our studies of

Swedish highly skilled migrants. Sweden has, for a long time, been considered one of the countries with a more even gender balance compared to other countries, according to World Economic Forum (2018) and World Value Survey[3] (Hellum and Oláh 2019). Even though we have a set of interviewees with different professional backgrounds, they work in Sweden and have experiences from family support through both the Swedish welfare system and Swedish family politics.

As the interviewees compared work-life abroad and in Sweden, some of them also compared family life before, during, and after mobility. The notion of family is continuously imagined, negotiated, and affirmed in everyday practice (Shinozaki 2014). Family mobility also relies on imagining life in new places, planning or organizing the move to "other" places, with sometimes very different "geographical imaginations" (Bauder, Hannan and Lujan 2016; Doherty, Patton and Shield 2015: 195; Riaño et al. 2015, Wolanik Boström, Öhlander and Pettersson 2018). In our previous and current projects (Pettersson 2011; Wolanik Boström and Öhlander, 2016; Wolanik Boström, Öhlander and Pettersson 2018), we have problematized temporary international mobility from Sweden and how family ideals are described. Both researchers and medical practitioners talked about the (implicit) images and ideals of gender contract, family life, and parenthood, and how these images and ideals were negotiated or challenged by moving abroad.

Most of the interviewed NGO doctors mentioned the societal security of Sweden compared to the more hazardous regions of the world, mainly in the Global South, where it would be difficult to bring partners or children on an assignment. The hazards of conflict-ridden or catastrophe areas, with no childcare or English-speaking schools available, was a stark contrast to the Swedish system with local municipality run schools, low crime rates, and a welfare subsidized school system. The NGO doctors also compared the contrasts between the "local" and the "expatriate," where the incoming physicians lived on compounds reserved for the "expatriate" team and received security services.

If the safety demands could be met, bringing family and children along to *safe* areas in the Global South, with good infrastructure, was considered to be very educational due to the possibility of seeing different aspects of the world, and even the experience of being perceived as "different" and exotic. Peter recalled his first visit to a potential work in the Global South, in societies with lesser developed industrialization, democracies, and care functions than the Global North.

> Well, the first thought was that this is a nice center but it is impossible to bring children over here, you could see what was around [the compound] and it was a bazaar area, it was incredibly messy and there were children beggars running around and carrying their younger siblings and you felt like no, this is just too much, it is impossible… but then you realize that you can have an everyday life side to side with this.

Among the doctors who went to other Western countries, the contrast and comparisons are not this drastic, but they are still in the center of narration. Anita had got an offer to stay in a research institute at Harvard. She said she was not extremely career-oriented, but she wanted to do some meaningful research and had learned about a program for single mothers. She applied and received stipends. She also hired a nanny, "which I *never* could have had [in Sweden]." That leads to a more accessible work situation with a full-time job, without interruptions. Her daughter had been well cared for and had attended an excellent-quality school, and Anita had thrived.

Some interviewees talked about how the stay abroad challenged the ideal of an equal relationship, dual careers, and respectful parenthood, which were implied as a self-evident norm in their Swedish life. Because the stay was temporary or "parenthetic," the experienced deviation from a Swedish gender script seemed acceptable (Wolanik Boström and Öhlander, 2016, Wolanik Boström, Öhlander and Pettersson 2018).

While for the doctors, mobility was more optional, for the molecular biologists, it was expected and considered crucial for their future career. A returning topic was childcare while working outside Sweden. Within the Swedish system, the municipality had provided day-care at a low cost. Organizing family life with two work-oriented adults required reliable day-care and was the reason why some of the interviewees had decided to return to Sweden, from both European and overseas countries. For others, the stay had prompted more focus on the family, learning how different school systems worked, helping the children with homework, and regarding it as "an adventure."

Earlier research has problematized gender aspects of work mobility and family life, e.g., women as "trailing spouses," getting more "domesticated" and meeting different expectations of expected gender performance (see, e.g., Lundström, 2014). In some of our cases, a spouse could not get any work and experienced a more socially conservative and economically vulnerable lifestyle "at home" (cf. Lundström and Twine 2011; Klekowski von Koppenfels 2014; Lundström 2014; Doherty, Patton and Shield 2015). The interviewees in our studies also made comparisons on expectations on the labor market and concerning gender equality. Several interviewees had a partner without work permits in the countries they moved to, like the United States and New Zealand. The following partners were not at all used to be stay-at-home-parents. They also struggled with local expectations that they were considered people who were taking care of the entire household. What was considered dubious in Sweden was accepted and sometimes expected in their foreign context.

Here, the comparisons with the in Sweden norm of parallel careers among partners, gender equality, and institutionalized day-care for children were considered markers for life quality and were also the arguments for forming a good life. Several interviewees defined life as a mobile professional as something that broke the ordinary organization of everyday life; here, mobility could be used as an excuse for more traditional gender roles or temporary childcare solutions. This type of comparison was defined as problematic, but not long-lasting and thus short-term, and therefore justifiable (Wolanik Boström, Öhlander and Pettersson 2018).

Another comparison the interviewees made was the treatment of children and which part the children took, or at least were considered to have a voice when the family was going to make crucial decisions. Mobility was considered to be such a decision. Even though the interviewees defined the children's mobility as something positive and useful cultural experience, the children's situation abroad compared with their Swedish situation caused guilt. To not do something that was considered only "for the best of the children" was controversial. Challenges like entering a new school system in another language and learning and adjusting to foreign social and cultural contexts were discussed with some guilt. Peter said that when he worked for the NGO in an Asian country and his children went to an English school, and it was very different from the more laid-back Swedish school system:

> It was tougher than in Sweden, I mean the four-year-old hade some homework to do every day, and a school uniform and tests and grades for both of our children. But then, we were not so very worried about homework, when we went for the talks with the teachers, they were concerned that he did not do his homework (smiling) but we thought: Never mind, it will probably be all right anyway.

The majority of the interviewees who were post-doctoral researchers did not have children when they moved abroad, but a few of them had. Lars, a researcher in molecular biology, moved with his wife, a post-doctoral researcher, and child to France. He described a situation full of confusion when trying to apply for a place for his child at a French day-care. He laughed at the situation and compared it with the applications in Sweden through the municipalities. In France, he said, "my postdoctoral mentor gave the day-care center a call, shouted at them, and then it was done, we had a place for our child there." According to Lars, this experience exposed a society with the unequal treatment of parents and unequal treatment of children's access to day-care.

Tina, another molecular biologist, moved to the US for career reasons to develop as a researcher. Her children's deep resistance to that was considered as being a big quandary. When she brought up such aspects, like considering the children's perspective when planning her own professional life, she was met with very little understanding in the United States. The reaction she received was not to worry, and to remember that the children should not have anything to do with the decision making, like "It is not their business" or "It will be fine, why should you dwell on that!". To consider children as individuals and as active family members with their feelings and emotions was very different in the US compared to Sweden.

The interviewee Victoria, a doctor working as a clinic researcher, was talking about the driving force behind leaving Sweden for work abroad:

> Partly so, I think it is useful for the children to live elsewhere. And then I and my husband had been traveling and backpacking around in Australia and felt that, yes, but it would be fun to test and work there. And that there was the possibility that I knew this kind of service. As a fellow then in endocrine surgery, which is also good for the job's sake. So that's why we started talking about it, that it would be fun.

As the above quote states, the interviewees define an experience of living elsewhere as useful for the kids. Several of the interviewees state that being exposed to something different is central, and they also use comparison to persuade other family members to be more positive about moving abroad. Traveling and experiencing something new, exploring a new country, these people constitute a kind of general driving force interwoven with professional curiosity. Mobility is also linked to the desire to discover, to have new experiences. One of the molecular biologists, for example, used the idea of being culturally exposed to a new society and culture as an argument to not stay in Sweden.

Maria, working as a clinician and researcher, also argues about curiosity and mobility as a way to get new energy for research:

> And then maybe I had lost my eye for the research because I felt that maybe it was really right to make this choice, I would have done in some other way, maybe invest in the clinic first and research. / --- / But then I started to think about that if I should do it, if I should go and research after my thesis then it will be pretty soon, you cannot wait as many years as ever and when I was started with those thoughts so I was at some meeting and met {inaudible} in child surgery in Philadelphia where I finally ended up then and started talking to him and he was like very very welcome, wisdom came and research with us if you arrange your own financing. But of course, I was very welcome and that made me kick this sparkle that maybe I should try then I started searching for money.

A more general curiosity in other places and cultures is interwoven with considerations about which research colleagues it would be valuable to cooperate with. This was, however, to be combined with comparisons and negotiation of gender expectations, lack of welfare systems, and the risk and possibilities for family members like children to adjust and function during the time of being mobile and living in a foreign country.

Home and Abroad

When being abroad, being open-minded in general, is considered to be a necessary personality trait, both professionally and socially. In the interviews, several mentioned that the visit abroad gave important insights professionally. Curiosity on people's actions, the workplace's organization, and linguistic and cultural contexts can be instrumental: By comparing and with gained knowledge from other ways of organizing work differently elsewhere outside Sweden, a medical professional can understand what is going on to change the Swedish workplace more in-depth. In our studies, a general curiosity of the world – perceived as *different* from the well-known Swedish reality – was an important driving force for moving abroad. Other languages, cultures, organizations, and social structures were interesting. For example, molecular biologist Anna says: "I have always thought it is fun to travel, to go to different places and meet a lot of new people. I think that is fun. See how it is in different places simply".

With the experience of what it is like to live abroad and be in the linguistic minority, one can understand that it might be easygoing and relaxing to spend time with people talking your own language and sharing similar cultural values. These comparisons the interviewees conduct and reflect upon affect the view of the Swedish workplace, the recruitment of staff, how you treat people in the lab and at the department, and thereby developing as a scientist and becoming a good research leader in the future.

The interviewees reflect on everyday occurring variations in lifestyles, values, norms, and ways of organizing work at their workplace. Values regarding work pace, how people organize work together in research groups or individually, patients' behavior demands and treatment, and expectations on health care were topics brought up. Also, the everyday social interactions, how people socialize at work, and their spare time in Sweden and their previous foreign workplace were considered.

A different topic that was discussed was comparisons between hierarchies in work life. The hierarchy in Sweden is described as relatively flat, while countries like the UK and the US are used as examples of more hierarchical work relationships. One of the interviewees compares his experience of hierarchies and responsibility in the United States and Sweden. The US, he considers, is more hierarchical than Sweden. In everyday professional life, it plays out as an independency, where he, as a co-worker, is trusted to take responsibility, make his own decisions, and does not need to go and ask for permission for each task. He emphasizes that responsibility is given early, which also boosts self-esteem. He thus emphasizes that the gained knowledge and experience during years in the US. Here, an openness to the fact that people “can do different things than here [in Sweden]. So that I become independent in that way, and I take it with me.”

Being mobile and comparing cultural traits in a different setting enhanced the cultural sensitivity and the insight that everything could be thought or done differently (see also Wolanik Boström and Öhlander 2015; Öhlander, Wolanik Boström and Pettersson 2019). These comparisons are not just an intellectual endeavor but also an embodied experience. The molecular biologist Marty brings up a moment of self-reflexivity and an outsider's gaze on his situation. He and his family moved from Sweden to the United States. His wife did not have a job in their home-city at that time and was bound to find social interaction dependent on their research contacts but also outside a work-environment. This made Marty reflect on the importance of parks and outdoor facilities as meeting places for immigrant:

> After our stay in the United States, I can upon my return to Sweden understand why immigrants socialize together in clusters. It is easier to socialize with people in your language. And it is not strange that people want to eat the specific food they are used to. I mean, that is what we sometimes enjoyed as well in the US. So, yes, I think I understand immigrants today rather differently. Off course it is nice to socialize in your own group and talk in your own language.

Comparisons evoked by mobility contain firsthand embodied, emotional, and intellectual experiences. Upon returning to Sweden, after living and working abroad for a longer or shorter period, several interviewees describe feeling like a stranger in a cultural context that had been taken for granted. We have called this feeling of being a temporary stranger "returners' cultural jetlag." When the interviewees experienced the cultural jet-lag, they realized they had adapted to their temporary home country. In their mind, Sweden, was assumed to be the "normal," but on return to Sweden, the Swedish was suddenly strange, and the unknown. Parts of the Swedish society had changed, but some interviewees also had to learn how to be "Swedish" (Öhlander, Wolanik Boström and Pettersson 2019).

Firsthand experiences of other ways of living and doing things made cultural comparisons necessary to sort things out upon return to Sweden. Cultural comparisons were a way to handle a short period of cultural and/or professional disorientation and set the cultural bearings again. The reflections and cultural comparisons in cultural jetlag did not always mean that the interviewees returned to life before the period of international mobility. One example of how the return to Sweden furthered comparisons and insights on how one changed as a researcher comes from the interview with Maria. She worked for 12 months as a researcher in the US. In the interview, she talked about how she has been "infected with this American mentality." She describes her experience in an American research environment as something that has affected her in becoming good at focusing on possibilities and less on the difficulties or disadvantages of each project. She also stresses that her time being abroad in the US affected her motivation on how to realize an idea. Here, she also emphasizes the experience of being in another country and at another workplace as something transformative: "I have become a little infected with their way of working and just wanting to get better." That transformative experience is ascribed to the change of workplace, country, research environment, and mobility.

Several interviewees told us about how the cultural jetlag resulted in new cultural bearings. They changed as persons, their views of themselves as professionals, their ways of organizing work in research teams, and challenging their previous idea about developing a workplace professionally. There are also stories about re-adaptation, such as re-learning how to eat lunch and having a "fika," an almost institutionalized workplace coffee break in Sweden at 9.20 am and at 14.30 am are also expected to socialize with your co-workers.

The comparisons between home and abroad serve as a method for the interviewees to rationalize their choice of moving abroad and returning to Sweden. They use their examples of comparisons to formulate both their idea of family and social relations and compare their work abroad and the return to Sweden. It is the return, and the comparisons they make upon return, that make their professional mobility and foreign work-life transformative. The return created a double level of reflexivity, not only by comparing the move to one or several foreign countries, but also a return to what is considered to be home.

Conclusion: Comparing and Contrasting Work and Everyday Life in Relation to International Mobility

In this paper, we have analyzed how comparisons as an everyday practice are used by medical professionals and scholars in the humanities to understand experiences of international mobility. The focus has been on mobility intersecting work life and private life as this becomes visibly in mobility as risk-taking, mobility and family life, and "home" and being abroad. The interviewees make comparisons regarding their professional experiences, but moreover, everyday life, attitudes towards gender and equality, and societal structures. Overall, comparison is used as a way of orientation in the sometimes-complex life as an internationally mobile, highly skilled professional. Comparison sorts out and gives meaning to new experiences and helps to get the right cultural bearings when arriving at a new site in a "foreign" country and different professional work cultures.

Furthermore, comparison is a tool to deal with "cultural jet-lag" after moving back from abroad. In this way comparison, as an everyday practice is a way of learning and a way of simplifying complex experiences of, for example, unfamiliar cultural contexts or the returnees' temporary feelings of being a stranger when meeting familiar cultural traits upon return home. Being a mobile professional and using comparison to understand new experiences contributed to enhanced cultural sensitivity and widened the perspectives resulting from the insight that everything could be thought or done differently.

Notes

1 A long period of time abroad could be up to 24 months or in rare cases more. A short period of time abroad could be between a week and a few months.

2 According to Swedish work regulations and laws for government run institutions in higher education must offer a permanent position for anyone who has been employed two years on temporary basis, including academics, https:/akademssr.se/jobb-lon/anstallning/anstallningsformer.

3 http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/.

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Comparison as a Means of Encountering Others in the Estonian–Finnish Transnational Space

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Abstract
Drawing on interviews with Estonian families who move between Estonia and Finland, the article elaborates on how interviewees use comparison to build their identity and belonging and to justify their choices. When negotiating membership in Finland, the strategy of invisibility is available since there are no visible differences that would cause them to be categorised as different. However, Estonian families also use contrast as a form of counter-speech against discrimination and as a strategy to highlight the difference between themselves and different others, portraying themselves as hard-working, deserving immigrants.

Keywords: Estonia, Finland, transnationalism, labor migration, discrimination, comparison

Introduction

The capitals of Estonia and Finland, Tallinn and Helsinki, are separated by a two-and-a-half-hour ferry journey. The two cities are sometimes playfully referred to as Talsinki or Hellinna, and the most imaginative plans picture a tunnel connecting the cities, making it possible to move from one city to another by car or train in half an hour. The shared space of Estonia and Finland is of course much more than only Talsinki. It can also include commuting 1000 kilometres from Tartu in southern Estonia to Rovaniemi in northern Finland, something that entails endless hours in a car, unless your employer has paid for flights, as they have done for one of the doctors I interviewed.

Exactly how much the COVID-19 pandemic changes mobility patterns between these countries remains to be seen, but prior to this event movement between Estonia and Finland was so intense that researchers talked about an Estonian–Finnish transnational space (see Jakobson et al. 2012). Especially after 2004, when Estonia joined the European Union, labour migration from Estonia to Finland increased significantly, and since 2006 Estonians have not needed a work permit to work in Finland. On the one hand, Estonians can be regarded as a rather privileged group of migrants in Finland (with regard to nationality and race), while on the other their position is precarious, as is that of any minority group.

In 2013, when I started my fieldwork with Estonian families moving between Estonia and Finland, the work was within the framework of a project that concentrated on children's experiences of migration and mobility. Accordingly, the research par-

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ticipants were families with children. In subsequent years my focus shifted slightly from children to adults, although the perspective of the family has remained central. This article presents an ethnographic case study exploring ways in which the (adult) interviewees narrate their belonging, modes of being-at-home in a place and plans for the future. To illustrate the kind of material I am working with, I will summarise the story of Kairi,[1] a 43-year-old woman whom I interviewed. Kairi is a doctor and lives in Finland with her son.

> When I divorced my husband, it was financially very difficult time for me. At the beginning I went to Finland for weekend shifts. Then I received an offer to work there full time and I decided to give it a go. I had heard that Finland has a very good kindergarten and school system. The kindergarten system is indeed very child-centred and teachers at school are also very friendly. As a matter of fact, nothing extra is required from children. The Finnish school system is terribly tolerant of everyone. Children should be encouraged to try a little bit harder, develop their abilities. However, I would not claim the children need to do nothing. But what I still don't get is why they have to go to school in socks, indoor shoes are not used.
>
> At first I didn't really miss anything from Estonia, but now I miss everything. Food, going to the theatre… In Finland I basically don't eat any meat, I don't like Finnish meat products at all. And in Finland there is a complete lack of the barbecue culture that we have in Estonia. Finns take a position that we have always eaten this and it is good, Estonians say "why don't we give this a try".
>
> And at work… in Finland, people's temperament and work culture are quite different. There is less work, also physically. Unfortunately, I have to say that the Finns don't have a very high work culture. If it is time to have a lunch break it is more important than the fact that your sick patient is waiting. Maybe one reason why Estonians are valued is that we do a lot of work. In Finland, if the working day ends at 3 o'clock it ends at 3 o'clock, exactly. Construction workers say the same thing. At 3 o'clock the hammer falls and the next day you'll pick it and continue work from where you left off.
>
> There are also Estonians in our work collective, and we do keep together. Estonians understand you in a different way. Finns are like Estonians, not very open, right. And to talk about a more negative side, although I feel I'm doing well, the Finns nevertheless have an opportunity to tell me I'm Estonian after all, and have studied in another university. Finns think that Estonians are somehow still a little lower than them. Politically Finns are very correct, outwardly, they say a dark-skinned person is also a human, but what they do and think inwardly is entirely something else. We are treated better than the real refugees, perhaps because we work, right. The demands refugees have are very high, the taxes I pay are also used to support them. But they will never integrate here. I was much more tolerant actually before I went to Finland.
>
> When I come to Estonia I do everything here. I go to the hairdresser, beautician, pedicure, manicure. In my opinion Finns cannot do this job, that's what all Estonians say, don't they? The Estonian woman, even if she doesn't earn that high a salary, somehow she takes more care of her appearance.
>
> As a single mother, it is much easier to cope in Finland. In Estonia I would not have been able to raise my child alone. However, now I would be ready to come back but my son said he wants to be in Finland, his friends and school are there. My poor

> son is now in the middle, I guess he doesn't know exactly whether he is a Finn or an Estonian. And Finnish work culture spoils people. It is much easier to come from Estonia to Finland than to come back from Finnish working conditions. And people in Estonia tend to think that we make easy money. Going back we would certainly hear that we are traitors who went and lived an easy life in Finland.

Kairi told me her story in two interview sessions in 2016 and 2017. In her answers, she was probably guided by the idea of giving me a meaningful explanation of her choices and life course, and the summary I made here highlights her use of different comparisons, which will be analysed in more detail later in the article. Comparison is present in Kairi's story on many levels—sometimes more implicitly, sometimes more explicitly. Usually she uses comparison on her own initiative, not as a result of my question encouraging her to compare the two societies, for example. Kairi contrasts the possibilities available to her as a single mother in Finland and in Estonia and compares the challenges of leaving Estonia to those of returning. She spells out the differences in working cultures and school systems, touches on what she feels to be boundary markers, and on gendered, bodily aspects of migration, and contrasts mobile Estonians with refugees and sedentary Estonians.

In the context of migration, comparison is used to construct identity and belonging. Ulrika Wolf-Knuts (2003) has studied contrast as a narrative technique among Swedish-speaking Finns who have emigrated to South Africa. As she points out, the very concept of emigration implies the idea that one country has advantages over another. Something that can be seen when people narrate their lives, giving meaningful explanations for their choices.

In this article I aim to elaborate on how the interviewed Estonians use comparison to build identity and belonging. They do this by representing their choices as reasonable and highlighting the differences between the two countries, as well as using comparisons of themselves and others in a way that emphasises their own identities in the context of migration.

Context and Research Data

Since 1991, neighboring Finland has been the most popular destination for Estonian migrants because of geographic, cultural and linguistic proximity. These enable migrants to return to Estonia often, therefore retaining parts of their lives there, and to learn Finnish quickly (Anniste 2014, 24–25). Labour migration from Estonia to the longer-serving EU member states increased after EU accession in 2004, and there are many Estonian circular migrants and transnational commuters. Since 2004, there have been changes in the composition of Estonian emigrants with substantially more originating from the rural areas of Estonia; at the same time, the proportion that are highly educated has decreased. Migrants have also become younger, and the emigration of ethnic Estonians (as compared to other ethnicities living in Estonia) has increased significantly (Anniste 2014, 20).

More than half of the Estonian citizens currently working abroad do so in Finland, where they comprise the largest group of foreign citizens. According to the Estonian population register, there were 52,400 Estonian citizens living in Finland in July 2019, in addition to 18,500 with a registered Finnish contact address. According to one estimate, in 2012 there were an additional 30,000 Estonians commuting and working in Finland but living permanently in Estonia (Statistics Finland 2013). It has been pointed out that Estonia is one of the major countries of origin for commuting workers in Europe: the highest percentage of the workforce leaving their country of origin to work are Slovakians (5%), and Estonians and Hungarians (just over 2% each) (European Commission 2019, 78). Men were clearly dominant (92%) among those who worked abroad but reside in Estonia (European Commission 2019).

In recent years the volume of emigration has been smaller and return migration to Estonia has increased. In 2019, Estonia's net migration was positive for the fifth year in a row, and the net migration with Finland was positive for the third year in a row (Statistics Estonia 2020). However, return migration trends might also change according to the economic and political situations.

Estonians most often move to neighbouring Finland in search of higher wages—better working conditions, higher living standards and social guarantees are also appealing. As stated by Alho and Sippola (2018), the Estonian neoliberal economic model is highly exposed to economic fluctuation. This, together with weak social security, leaves the Estonian workforce vulnerable. Often children and young people are at the centre of migration and mobility, with parents frequently migrating to create a better future for their children and families. What at first sight might seem to be purely economic or political transnationalism can often implicitly, if not overtly, be for the wellbeing of future generations (see Coe et al. 2011, 3–5, 11).

The article is based on ethnographic fieldwork (2013–2014, 2016–2019) consisting of participant observation and interviews among (ethnic) Estonian families in which some family members live or work in Finland, or have done so in the past.[2] The interviewees had different occupations, for example construction worker, doctor, entrepreneur, credit analyst, bus driver, teacher, cleaner, office worker and nurse. In addition, some interviewees were studying or unemployed. A typical pattern among the families studied is that the father first works in Finland and the spouse and children join him later, with their planned short-term relocation becoming extended. There are also some one-parent families and cross-border commuters among the interviewees. Altogether, 41 interviews were conducted in the greater Helsinki area and in Turku (Finland)[3] as well as in Tartu (Estonia). Seven of the interviews were group interviews in which more than one member of the family was present. One of the interviews was conducted in Finnish but otherwise the language used in the interviews was Estonian. The interviewees were recruited through children's club activities, Estonian language courses, kindergarten(s), through common acquaintances, or through social media. After the research was reported in the news some interviewees themselves took the initiative and contacted project members. Where possible, different members of the same family were interviewed. Among the interviewees there were 24 women, 7 men, and 18 children (aged 6 to 15). The interviewees had moved to Finland from different parts of Estonia: many are from the cities of Tartu, Tallinn, and Pärnu and surrounding regions, but there are also families from Viljandi and Jõgeva counties, for example. The majority of Estonians working and/or residing in Finland do so in the metropolitan area of Helsinki, as did many of the families who contributed to this study. However, there are also thousands of Estonians living in other parts of the country, including the countryside.

Narrating Belonging

Home and homemaking can be approached as processes that contain different dimensions. 'Home' refers both to a material dwelling and to an affective space shaped by emotion and feelings of belonging (Blunt and Dowling 2006). Studying the concept of home in migration, Ralph and Staeheli (2011) suggest that home should be understood in conjunction with belonging. They stress the importance of conceptualising home as both dynamic and moored, experienced both as a location and as a set of relationships that shape identities and feelings of belonging. They also argue that people who do not cross borders experience homes the same way – as locations, as relationships, as simultaneously fixed and fluid. Home can thus be seen as a "space in-becoming" (Nowicka 2007, 73): belonging to a home emerges from sets of relationships and entwined social processes of incorporation and exclusion that are partly self-defined, partly other-defined (Young 1990). Thus, the challenge is not only to examine migrants' articulations of home, but at the same time to interrogate ways in which various social relations and power geometries influence complex registers of home (Ralph and Staeheli 2011, 520).

For the interviewees, "feeling at home" is connected to being appreciated and to material security and safety, as the later examples in the article show. While belonging is a subjective feeling, it is also socially defined: it is important to be surrounded by people significant to you – family, friends, etc., – and to feel that surrounding society treats you well. This social element of belonging speaks not only to the feelings of identification and familiarity, but to experiences of inclusion and exclusion (Ralph and Staeheli 2011, 523).

During the interviews people gave different accounts of their feelings about belonging. Initially, living in Finland can be loaded with practical and other difficulties, but accounts of the first encounter sometimes also resemble stories of "love at first sight", with positive feelings and significant emotions. Stories of the first encounter often entail implicit comparisons, describing how interviewees have felt in different places. Since the stories are personal experience or family stories describing the emotional attachments people have, they cannot be judged to be right or wrong (see Wolf-Knuts 2003, 93). During her interview Signe described the difficulties she and her family met in Estonia. Their first choice had not been to leave Estonia, but in order to provide for his family, Signe's partner left to work in Finland and Signe went to visit him after a short separation. Emotions were high, and she soon decided to follow him to Finland. The story of her arrival to Finland sums up her positive feelings of hope and of new beginnings, and the joy of having her family together again:

> The related, beautiful story is that when I arrived in Finland with the father of my children, when I stepped off of the ferry in Katajanokka harbour […] you know, here was quite a different scent, a different feeling, I would call it a scent of love. […] two days I spent here, and when I went back with the boat, I knew exactly that my place was here. My place was next to my partner. […] Of course, my boss, he laughed outright in my face: what would I do there? I didn't know. I had no plan of what to do. I just thought about my family, that family needs to be together, it was my only thought.
>
> (Woman, 45)

After Signe's arrival in Finland, she found work and her children went to school and kindergarten. Signe says that it was during this period that she heard herself laughing again for the first time in a long while.

Signe's account points to the importance of sensory experiences and related emotions in settling into new surroundings. In migrations studies, when understanding 'migrant worlds' more and more attention has been given to the body as it moves between places and locales, and to the importance of the affective and emotional dimensions of mobility (see Wang 2016, 5). People perceive their surroundings through their bodies, in addition to which comparison is not just an intellectual process, it is something that we perceive with our senses (Wolf-Knuts 2003, 98–99). Sensation in itself can also be a boundary marker: when it makes itself felt, one is on the border, but when one grows accustomed to it one hardly notices it (ibid., 101). However, how and when these sensations are verbalised, i.e. when the memories become relevant, depends on the life situation of the person.

When interviewees narrate belonging to their current place of residence they are not only talking about their experiences and the feelings they have towards Estonia or Finland. While belonging is a subjective feeling, it is also socially defined (Ralph and Staeheli 2011, 523). As the interviewees were and are trying to position themselves in society, their feelings of belonging develop in relation to other people and groups. Although the group of Estonians in Finland may seem homogeneous to an outsider, there are in fact hierarchies and inequalities. Some interviewees have stated that they keep a distance from other Estonians because of the lack of common interests or shared values. These in-group hierarchies also become visible when the interviewees talk about Estonians (but also other migrants) who (presumably) live on social benefits. When making these comments they stress that they have worked hard all their lives, and have come to work in Finland. One reason for this type of juxtaposing is that levels of acceptance of different types of immigrant are, among other things, strongly tied to socio-economic factors. For example, Finns are most accepting of immigrants who hold jobs and qualifications (Salonen and Villa 2006), and Estonians living in Finland tend to be influenced by this pattern. One can say that value judgements and articulations of morality are always present, and are used in identity negotiations, within the different categories imposed on immigrants, either by host societies or by co-immigrants (see Koskela 2014). Contrasting herself with some other migrants she knows, Pille, a 30-year-old woman, said during the interview that she is willing to work hard in order to have a higher income than social benefits alone would bring her:

> Many Estonians come here to live on the social benefits, like they receive their 800 euros a month. I would never think like that, I would rather think that if I would work, I would receive 2,000 euros, why should I sit here for 800 euros. But people put up with 800 euros and then they sit and think why don't they have this or that, but we have done it all ourselves and worked our fingers to the bone, thanks to which we do have our own problems […].
>
> (Woman, 30)

This can be taken as a statement against the widespread idea of migrants living easy lives, taking advantage of the social benefits offered in Finland—or other Western European countries. Pille's (un)intentional aim seems to be to portray herself as a deserving, good immigrant in the eyes of the majority population as a way of challenging the categorisations or identity positions potentially imposed on her by others. This rhetorical strategy, also called counter-speech, is typically employed by narrators in contexts where they feel that their reputations and identities are threatened (Juhila 2004; Bock and Horigan 2015, 65). However, this strategy can also increase suspicion between different groups.

In their study on Estonian migration to Finland, Anniste et al. (2017) have distinguished three migration patterns: bi-national migrants, circular migrants and transnational commuters. These groups have somewhat different orientations. Bi-national migrants have either stayed in Finland for many years and/or intend to remain long-term, although they still have relatively strong ties to Estonia. Circular migrants, on the other hand, view their migration as temporary and plan to return soon, hence they do not wish to invest much effort in establishing social relations in Finland. Transnational commuters are connected to their host country solely through work, remaining simultaneously active in their social and family lives in Estonia. These different orientations are discernible among my interviewees, some of whom could be called bi-national migrants according to this categorisation. They have criticised their acquaintances, and, in general, other Estonians for sticking to their temporary solutions. These solutions, together with recurrent visits to Estonia, also affect 'homemaking' and the ways people relate to different places (cf. Siim and Assmuth 2016). This "lasting temporariness" (Grzymała-Kazłowska 2005) can be looked down on at least in part because setting one's roots in a single place remains the norm, deviations from which seem to call for explanations.

According to the experiences of the interviewees, travelling back and forth between the two countries makes it more difficult to settle and feel at home in Finland. As one woman stated, she could not live in this way:

> I feel very sad for those Estonians here who live a hundred of them together, not wanting to create a home here, they are just here to work. But never in my life would I imagine that kind of life for myself. I mean you can move because of a job, but then you'd move your whole life with you, or not move at all, or move somewhere to finish some job in one or two months, but not do it for years. […] There are a lot of people like that

> here actually, who go home. To Tallinn or somewhere else [in Estonia]. I feel sad about those families as well. But different things fit for different people. I cannot say it's bad, but I couldn't imagine it for myself.
>
> (Woman, 37)

However, it is not easy to distinguish between "short-term" mobility and "permanent" migration in the Estonian–Finnish context (Alho & Kumer-Haukanõmm 2020, 251). Many of the interviewees first come to Finland for a short period, planning to return. Only when the stay is prolonged or a family realises that living separately does not suit them does the family follow. Families who have decided to move together as a family, often stress the importance of being together in one country, but it is important to keep in mind that these accounts are strongly context-dependant. Stories told by cross-border commuters and their families also show the bright sides of this arrangement: family members staying in Estonia do not need to change their everyday routines or give up their social networks, children can continue going to school in a familiar environment, it is easier to take care of elderly relatives who remain, increased income may resolve long-term problems in family life, and separation can make people appreciate family time more (see also Telve 2019).

In addition to these in-group distinctions between cross-border commuters, circular migrants and families whose stay is more permanent, interviewees have set themselves apart from other migrant groups, stressing the cultural closeness of Estonians to Finns and cherishing an image of themselves as good and deserving immigrants (cf. Alho and Sippola 2018). Estonians do not necessarily consider themselves immigrants at all. In the next interview excerpt Kairi reminds her ten-year-old son that they have also immigrated.

> Mother: We also had a funny incident once at home. [My son] came home from school, saying that the immigrants took their ball, why do they come here! Then I said, think calmly: you were also not born here.
>
> Son: One of my classmates said that Estonia and Finland are relatives.
>
> (Mother 43, son 10)

This type of attitude is not expressed only by children; interviewees also make a strong difference between themselves and other migrants. However, interestingly they do not compare themselves to all immigrant groups. The comparisons usually involve other Estonians, and sometimes Russians; from other immigrant groups, they generally compare themselves to refugees, who they term the "real immigrants". The negative attitude towards refugees is discernible in discussions in the Facebook groups of Estonians in Finland, during the interviews, and also in the results of the latest parliamentary elections. Estonian radical right-wing party EKRE turned out to be very popular among Estonians living and voting in Finland. EKRE (Conservative People's Party of Estonia) received 43.7% of the votes of Estonians living abroad, most of them in Finland (cf. In Estonia EKRE received 17.8% of the votes) (Postimees, 04/03/2019). Indeed, several interviewees claimed that Finnish people are too gentle and generous towards refugees, and they should rather think about their own people:

> Finland has too much of a soft heart, I would say, they accept everyone. But at least I think that if I moved to Africa tomorrow, the day after I would start to speak their language […] but the services for foreigners are too good here, especially for those who don't work, that's what I mean. […] That Finland tries to help all the refugees but doesn't take into consideration their own people.
>
> (Woman, 53)

As this and other similar examples show, there is sometimes tension among people who are grouped together by outsiders, or by the majority. Many interviewees seem to have adopted the public discourses on desirable and undesirable immigrants, and sometimes work hard to separate themselves from the latter. Thus, among immigrants themselves there is grouping and labelling similar to that exercised by the majority. Categorising and marginalising others helps the Estonian interviewees to bring into focus their shared communalities and sameness with Finns (cf. Ralph and Staeheli 2011, 524). Jon E. Fox (2013) has studied East European migrants working in the UK and states that there is evidence that they have been the targets of racism, but that much less attention has been focused on how they are also perpetrators of racism. The Hungarians and Romanians that Fox studied emphasise their superior work ethics as compared to other minorities. These comparisons can be used as leverage to improve their standing in the labour market and to define and defend their precarious position by portraying some other groups as inferior. Comparison can be used to prove that while one group came to a new country to work, other minorities are unscrupulous benefit shoppers (Fox 2013, 1879). Similarly, my interviewees used these linguistic strategies of contrast to create an image of themselves as good immigrants and/or to distance themselves from other social groups (cf. Snow and Anderson 1987; Alho and Sippola 2018).

Negotiating membership and sameness: different shades of discrimination

Despite the large number of Estonians in Finland, they have been described as an invisible minority (Lagerspetz 2020, 134–135). This is partly because there are no visible differences with which to categorise Estonians as different, and in many cases they also speak fluent Finnish. According to a survey conducted in 2009, as many as 68% of Estonian migrants in Finland are fluent in Finnish, with 57% in daily contact with Finns (Anniste 2014, 21). When negotiating membership and sameness in Finland, they thus have the possibility to choose the strategy of invisibility, either ignoring or silencing difference (see Giralt 2011). Maintaining this invisible position can protect against othering experiences and seems to suit many Estonians. They would not like to be mistaken for immigrants, or act like them by demanding (special) services from society, despite the fact that this risks not requesting help when it is truly needed.

For example, when meeting officials Estonians often do not ask for a translator, even though using this service would be helpful. Additionally, as compared to other big immigrant groups, the percentage of Estonian school children studying their mother tongue at school is smaller (Finnish National Agency for Education 2019). A clue as to why this behaviour should exist can be found when one takes into consideration the experiences of co-existence between Russians and Estonians in Estonia. Elo-Hanna Seljamaa, who has studied ethnic interaction in Tallinn, the multi-ethnic capital of Estonia, observes that ethnicity is usually rather silenced than amplified as part of Tallinn's everyday life (Seljamaa 2016). As my research has shown, Estonians tend to follow a similar pattern when relocating to Finland: they simply do not want to make too much fuss.

Estonians cherish their Estonian identity in the private sphere and practise it through certain valued cultural activities. In addition, due to the ease of travel they often visit Estonia and use cultural services there (Lagerspetz 2011). However, the pressure to assimilate into Finnish culture is strong among Estonians living or working in Finland. When I asked one interviewee whether he had encountered bad attitudes in Finland, he reminded me of the treatment that Russians have met in Estonia, a comparison that shows that this behaviour is not typical only to Finns:

> There is racism in Finland to a certain extent, I would even say quite a lot. […] But this hasn't caused me any obstacles, I didn't have any problems because of that. But Finns do treat Estonians like second-class citizens. But this is exactly the same way we Estonians treat Russians in Estonia.
>
> (Man, 40)

Sometimes it is a question of society not acknowledging their qualification, and the same has happened to people returning to Estonia. Finding a job corresponding to their education and work experience is hard and makes relocation more difficult, in both directions.

> Although I have finished the university education in Estonia, it doesn't count here, here I'm worth zero. In Estonia I was a high-level director, here a sales agent in a brand boutique.
>
> (Woman, 43)

According to some research participants, having a foreign family name can also hamper the search for a job, although it is also true that Estonians rank high in the immigrant hierarchy in Finland (Jaakkola 2009, 53; Koskela 2014). Interviewees reported that they felt welcome, at least from a pragmatic perspective: "[Finns] understood that since they don't bother doing [certain work] themselves, Estonians come and do it for them." (Man, 42). As one 32-year-old woman said when I asked about her treatment in Finland, people do sometimes stare at her when she speaks Estonian in the shops, but she only feels uncomfortable in public when speaking Russian:

> When I am alone or with my family, I haven't experienced racism or people glowering at me. But as soon as I am with Russians or start to talk in Russian wherever, in public swimming pools, the metro, then I've experienced that. […] But when I'm alone I haven't had any bad experiences. Maybe because I've tried to communicate as well as possible, and in Finnish as much as possible.
>
> (Woman, 32)

The implicit assumption behind this statement is that the newcomer him/herself should behave in a certain way to be more easily accepted. At the same time, as one interviewee states, it does not always matter what you do or do not do. According to him, in the construction sector there is no difference between the attitude towards Estonians and Russians: "for them, we are both similarly immigrants" (Man, 40). To a certain extent, interviewees also reported feelings of nonbelonging. After living in Finland for 12 years, one 19-year-old interviewee was planning to move back to Estonia. As a reason for her return, she said, "I never felt Finland is a home for me. […] it never was my thing somehow".

Although interviewees consider Finland a multicultural and tolerant society—as compared to Estonia—they have said that discrimination does exist in both countries, it just takes different forms. Interviewees compared the ways racism plays out in Finland and Estonia. According to many of them, in Finland people make more of an effort to be "politically correct", meaning that Finns are often not openly racist, but rather discrimination is better hidden. As the doctor whose interview I summarised earlier in the article claims, "Finns never say it straight to your face", rather it transpires in everyday situations that Estonians are classified as somehow lower class people, as Eastern Europeans, which brings associations with negative traits. She feels her colleagues refer to her background, when there is a debate at work and they are running out of medical arguments:

> I realised that when we are arguing, discussing a difficult case, and everyone has their own opinion, then when presenting medical arguments is no longer enough, they say, "maybe you do this in Eastern Europe". Even after seven years, they know who I am, don't they? This is extremely insulting.
>
> (Woman, 43)

This illustrates how belonging is never entirely about migrants' subjective feelings of fitting in or not, but also about how others define who belongs. Membership must be validated by the wider community or group to which one aspires to belong (Ralph and Staeheli 2011, 523). Derogatory statements can affect people's sense of belonging, and made some of the interviewees feel they are still not full members of Finnish society. As one 36-year-old man reports, he has a strong antipathy towards Finland and Finns:

> They still treat you like a second-class person, since even when an employer can choose who he will send to do a bad task, Estonians are his first choice.

> Let's say the work that needs to be done on Friday evening, it is Estonians who are sent to do it. They are not even asked whether they would like to travel home. Finns drop their tools already at 3 pm. Put their hammer down and simply walk away. And it is Estonians who need to stay and finish the job since, after all, they are dutiful, slightly slavish and they will finish the work.
>
> (Man, 36)

Although the passport one holds does not make a big difference, both Estonia and Finland being EU countries, the discrimination some people have experienced has made them consider applying for Finnish citizenship. For many it seemed that acquiring Finnish citizenship would help them live better and more secure lives in Finland. Interviewees mentioned wanting to make an application "to be on the safe side", "because of the kid(s)" or "to increase opportunities". In principle, multiple citizenship is not permitted according to Estonian law and the acceptance of the citizenship of another state entails the loss of Estonian citizenship. However, a person who has had Estonian citizenship from birth is not required to give up Estonian citizenship.

Juxtaposing Estonian and Finnish Societies and Cultures

On one hand, there is willingness among the interviewees to integrate into Finnish society and to stay unnoticeable. As shown above, there is also a tendency to stress the relative similarity of Finns and Estonians. On the other hand, people do constantly make everyday comparisons between the two societies and peoples, pointing out the differences. The evaluations people give of Finnish and Estonian societies depend on their future plans and can also change with interview context. Often these comparisons show the orientation of the interviewees—whether they are happy with their lives in Finland or are considering relocation. In this 32-year-old woman's account, Finland is depicted in a positive way. Her family is content with their living conditions in Finland.

> But Estonian kindergarten was so big, and it was there in Lasnamäe [the most populous district of Tallinn], between big apartment blocks, and there was not too much to do there in the playground. Whirl and twirl and climb, and there was a big accident after we left. Here [in Finland] it is simply so beautiful, and the kindergarten is here just at the end of the street, next to the forest. One day there were rabbits in the playground and it is more beautiful here. So yes, we are satisfied.
>
> (Woman, 32)

There are many traits in Finnish society that research participants appreciate, or have learned to appreciate, while living in Finland, including the more relaxed work culture. In addition, they often point out some Finnish customs that for them are strange or unfamiliar—like wearing socks at school instead of shoes or slippers. To some extent these are minor differences, related to the materialities of everyday life. Here comparison serves as a practical aid to successful management of everyday tasks, and as a way of informing newcomers of different practices, for example at school or in the workplace. Some comparisons touch the bodily aspects of everyday life, and, for example, dislike of Finnish food or mistrust of or disappointment in local healthcare services are more difficult to overcome. Many families do indeed bring food with them from Estonia, or where possible plan visits to the doctors during a trip home (see Siim 2020).

Some of the differences interviewees pointed out seem to carry deeper meaning and are related to questions of identity and belonging. As Stuart Hall (2000, 234) has written, all identity terms depend on marking their limits: we define ourselves in terms of what we are not, as much as in terms of what we are. In the context of relocation, identities are given greater attention and negotiated anew in relation to different others and different places. Families who have moved to Finland from Estonia have mentioned the differences in the relations between family members. They have stressed the warmth and closeness of family relations in their families, as compared to typical Finnish families. Like Pille, they feel that there is somehow less intimacy and care within Finnish families:

> I virtually haven't seen such a thing as I have with my child or like you see in Estonia, that you kiss and hug all the time, like here everything is very distant. I am your mother and you are my child and that's all. That kind of intimacy, and of course there are exceptions, but I'm thinking about the general picture, that such family warmth or intimacy [I have not seen], also between women and men, mother and father; everything is very formal.
>
> (Woman, 30)

When talking about Estonian and Finnish societies and families, interviewees also highlighted differences in the understandings of the roles and positions of men and women. As Mahler and Pessar (2001, 442) have put it, people do "gender work" in the transnational context, using practices and discourses to negotiate relationships and notions of masculinity and femininity.

Socially desirable masculinity in Estonia entails an image of a man as having 'golden hands,' i.e. someone who works hard and finds solutions to all kinds of practical problems. However, it is women who are given much more attention in the statements of the interviewees. Finnish women in particular, their appearance and behaviour, are the centre of much critical attention. As Kairi pointed out in her interview, summarised in the beginning of the article, Estonian women really know how to take care of their appearance. Many interviewees implied that in Finland men and women are "too equal", something that is seen as a negative trend.

In transnational contexts, leaning on gender roles typical to one's own culture can give migrants strength and support in a new cultural environment. However, thanks to the influence of the surrounding society these roles can also be contested and negotiated. In the case of Estonians in Finland, both of these tendencies are discernible. For example, interviewees have noted the changing role of fathers, which is partly thanks to the shorter working day that is typical to Finland and sometimes also because of missing support from grandparents or other social networks. As Telve (2019, 49) has stated based on her research on cross-border commuters, Estonian men who have worked in Finland for some time are eager to spend time with their family and are more comfortable being a family-oriented father, seeing it as a benefit. As this 42-year old woman says, people want to spend more time with their families in Finland:

> I have quite many acquaintances who said they came in order to be able to spend more time with their children. In Estonia it is probably work, work, work, away from home all the time. And for me it feels that actually families who have come here go out with the children more often, or spend more time together. It now struck me that maybe this is partly due to the fact that people don't have grandmothers and things here, and so have fewer places to take their kids, or can't go out alone without them. […] So we could say that fathers here take parental leave, they are often at home with the kids. Mothers go to work and the father is at home with the baby.
>
> (Woman, 42)

Estonia: Home country or foreign land?

During the interviews I also touched on what dreams people had for the future—did they see themselves living in Finland, Estonia, or somewhere else? Some of the interviewees had not never left Estonia for good, while some had returned or planned to do so when they retired. However, some of the interviewees had built their homes in Finland and said they did not want to drag their children back and forth between the two countries. Some were afraid they had become estranged from Estonian working culture. Both the person and Estonian society had changed too much to make a return possible. Dreams of the future also included the idea of living in a warmer climate. When I asked a 32-year-old woman whether she had plans to return to Estonia, this is how she answered:

> To Estonia definitely no. Rather to a warm country. […] we'll see how the children do at school, that is most important. If they don't have any problems here, then we would rather remain here while they grow up. But after that, certainly somewhere south, somewhere south.
>
> (Woman, 32)

When pondering their future place of residence, interviewees outlined the pros and cons of living in each place to make their decisions plausible. When talking about the timing of family movement, parents with children often mentioned children's schooling as an important factor affecting their decision. School systems and related everyday practices were constantly compared, and usually the Estonian curriculum was regarded as more demanding while the Finnish system gave the child more responsibility. Families did not usually consider returning permanently to Estonia before the children had finished school because they felt the different emphases in the school systems made relocation complicated for school-age children (see Assmuth and Siim 2018).

However, for some interviewees there were painful memories associated with Estonia. Often these related to the very reasons they had to leave in the first place, and why they were currently happy with their lives in Finland:

> Just like all around the world, certain norms have taken shape in society. And if you, for some reason, don't fit into these norms, you are an exception. Society was not ready to support and accept [us] as we were. There were expectations we could not meet. The reason for leaving Estonia was that we did not belong to and could not meet these norms. The only right decision was to leave.
>
> (Woman, 45)

As mentioned at the beginning of the article, weak social security makes the position of the Estonian workforce highly vulnerable. Many have felt that working in Finland was the only option for them, and in the cases of some single mothers who had difficulties making ends meet, a survival strategy. For these women, living transnationally is a way of coping with the disinvestment of the state in social support (Coe et al. 2011, 10; Schmalzbauer 2004). The comparison in the story quoted immediately above becomes more explicit later on, when she explains how she felt she was taken care of in Finland:

> When I was starting a new life in Finland, with all the difficulties and uncertainty, very quickly a friend offered a helping hand. This time the friend was the state of Finland. We received all the decisions and answers, saying that we would live here for real, and were accepted the way we were on an equal basis with those who were born here. The basic things one needs for life (an apartment, food) were organised by the social welfare office. Finally, a feeling of security arrived, from an economic point of view.
>
> (Woman, 45)

The interviewee justifies her decision to relocate by contrasting two societies and their readiness to help residents in need of help. Belonging is related to a feeling of security, a sense of being accepted. When reflecting on modes of being-at-home and talking about their plans for the future, interviewees also positioned themselves vis-à-vis dominant attitudes and discourses in Estonia, dismantling their own and others' understandings of their relationship to place(s). In the kind of situation described above, the line between voluntary and involuntary migration is quite thin. For many, relocation entails contradictory feelings—they do not feel they really had the possibility to choose. However, in Estonia people leaving to work abroad are often referred to as "convenience migrants" (*mugavuspagulased*), a term introduced by Estonian politician Tõnis Lukas in 2014 (ERR, 21/08/2014). He stated that the current wave of people leaving for "greener pastures" does so out of convenience and even out of laziness, and that these people are not comparable to "real refugees", people who had to leave the country in 1944. Since then, this term has been widely used and discussed in Estonia. It offends many of the interviewees: because of prevailing attitudes such as this a possible return to Estonia would entail challenges in both emotional and practical terms.

The article has looked at the ways the interviewed Estonians use comparison as a strategic resource that constructs and makes sense of belonging in relation to homeland, to the current place of residence, and to different others. Interviewees drew on discourses of difference to assert and defend their, in a way relatively privileged but still precarious, positions in Finland, highlighting their own belonging in opposition to the (migrant) Other (cf. Guðjónsdóttir 2014, 179). Comparison as a linguistic strategy can thus be seen to be used when responding to the prevailing, and changing, societal discourses and to positions related to migrants and migration, both in Estonia and in Finland. The study has shown that whether comparison is more implicit or explicit, its role is nevertheless essential in order to justify the chosen life trajectory and to create similarity by highlighting one's difference to others (cf. Lundström 2010, 71). The stories analysed do more than signify the values and identities of particular individuals or groups. They also enable people to contest articulations of morality and blame in broader societal contexts (cf. Bock and Horigan 2015, 65).

Notes

1 I use pseudonyms when referring to the interviewees. Interview transcripts were translated from Estonian or Finnish to English by the author and were lightly edited to increase readability.

2 The work has been done as a part of following research projects: Families on the Move: Children's Perspectives on Migration in Europe (funded by the Kone Foundation, 2012–2014; PI Prof. Laura Assmuth, University of Eastern Finland); Inequalities of Mobility: Relatedness and Belonging of Transnational Families in the Nordic Migration Space (Academy of Finland, 2015–2019; PI Laura Assmuth); and Performative Negotiations of Belonging in Contemporary Estonia (Estonian Research Council, 2018–2021, PI Dr Elo-Hanna Seljamaa, University of Tartu).

3 One of the interviews was conducted by Laura Assmuth.

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Between Madness and Reason: Comparison, Climate Change and Intergenerational Negotiations of Guilt

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Abstract
Climate change has become one of the most pressing issues of our time. It is firmly anchored in the Anthropocene, and it can be defined as an environmental, cultural, and political phenomenon that is reshaping the global world. This paper analyses how comparisons are used in the climate change debate as a way to negotiate norms and values, to regulate responsibilities, and clarify questions of certain forms of contested agency as a narrative attribution of guilt and blame; especially with regard to the moral discourse on options for action, as well as to draw up possible courses of action for a climate-friendly future. An ethnographic example of an exaggerated depiction of generational conflict is used to show the extent to which opposites but also similarities are created through the process of comparison. In addition to the extent to which plausibility and credibility and guilt, blame and justice are negotiated, it is emphasized that the dichotomous use of generational comparison refers less to a binary understanding of generational justice and capacity to act, but must rather be evaluated as a narrative code in the communication and meeting process.

Keywords: climate change, comparison as cultural practice, comparative values, plausibility, credibility, morality, justice, (in)equality, adaption, anticipation, agency

Introduction

"From model pupil to sinner" was one of the headlines that covered Germany and German (climate) politics in 2018.[1] Compared to other countries, Germany has been perceived as a pioneer in the field of climate protection for several years. Germany's commitment to reduce greenhouse gas emissions sounds impressive at first glance. These objectives were set in 2007 and supplemented in 2010, and they intended the following: "Germany aims to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 40 % by 2020 and by at least 55 % by 2030 compared to 1990 emission levels. Greenhouse gas neutrality is to be achieved to a high degree by 2050."[2] Furthermore, the objectives say that the Federal Government of Germany "intends to reach the climate protection targets with the help of the Climate Action Programme 2020 and the Climate Action Plan 2050" and that "without massive and rapid efforts the set targets will not be achieved."[3]

In the second half of 2018 and during spring and summer of 2019, however, it became apparent that Germany would resoundingly fail to meet these self-declared

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climate targets, at least those that planned to reduce emissions by 2020. Unfortunately for such a seemingly radical transformation to succeed, both energy production and consumption must be rethought and replanned. In addition, there are concrete but contested options for action that affect the individual lifestyle of the population's lifestyle, for example, cars need to emit less, heating systems need to be climate-friendly, the electricity sector needs to be powered by wind, sun, and biomass instead of coal and gas.

The politics of the government coalition between Conservatives and Social Democrats in Germany, especially the third and current fourth Merkel Cabinets from 2013/2014 until now, and the public debates of the issue have shown that the goals definitely cannot be achieved by 2020. Even the achievement of the goals for 2030 is uncertain. For this reason, the impressive targets of 2007/2010 have currently been revised by the grand coalition in the so-called *Klimapaket* (Climate Package) negotiations and were disclosed to the public in mid-October 2019.[4] The result of the negotiations —the Federal Climate Change Act—is currently under intense discussion. Especially the wording of the climate package and some resolutions caused a stir in the discussion. Based on the commitments under the Paris Agreement[5], Germany aims to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 55 to 56 percent by 2030 compared with 1990's levels. The 2020 target is now obsolete.

Furthermore, rather than "*implementing*" the targets, it is now a matter of "*pursuing*" the goal of reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Additionally, the German government is "*committed to implement*" rather than "*intending to reach*" the objective of greenhouse gas neutrality by 2050.[6] In principle, the Federal Climate Change Act is a comprehensive bill that continues to aim to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and promote sustainable energy conversion, especially in those sectors that for various reasons—including political inactivity—have not yet been able to fulfill these tasks, especially the sectors of transport, building, and industry. Proposed measures "*to support*" these reductions—again, the downgraded phrasing of the target—include a carbon price, a tax credit for train tickets and building refurbishment, and tax credits for commuters.[7]

Nongovernmental organizations, think tanks, and global movements such as "School Strike for the Climate"/"Fridays for Future" or "Extinction Rebellion"[8] criticize these aspects for their lack of ambition, the laxity of its instruments, the slow phase-out of coal and the lack of a clear long-term vision to reach the goal of climate neutrality by 2050.[9] As of December 2019, the grand coalition, together with parts of the opposition, has made further adjustments. For example, the price for the emission of the climate-damaging carbon dioxide (CO2) in traffic and buildings is to be raised from 2021 (25 euros instead of the planned 10 euros per barrel of carbon dioxide). In addition, the price of electricity is to fall as of 2021, the commuter allowance is to be increased, and rail tickets will become cheaper so that consumers can also feel the positive effects.[10]

All in all, it can be summarized that Germany's more or less failed reduction targets are external signs of the multifaceted problems that Germany is facing concerning the implementation of the climate goals of the Paris Agreement. Especially the difficult negotiations within the grand coalition and the critical discussion of the alleged political inactivity of the grand coalition by environmental organizations show this German political dilemma. A worldwide comparison even shows that Germany is only in the midfield of the energy transition index among the other so-called leading countries and that its position is falling rather than rising.[11]

In the wake of this reporting and other global events—the hot summers of 2018 and 2019, the so-called "dieselgate,"[12] the drought and fire disasters in the United States of America and Australia, climate change as a potential cause of migration in African and Asian countries, and the climate change skepticism of some political figures in global politics—the discussion on global warming, greenhouse gas emissions, and climate change was carried out even more consistently than in previous years. Not a day goes by without another report that indirectly or directly addresses global warming and climate change. Every area of life seems to be affected in some way by this discussion.

Among other things, the climate discussion is about setting comparisons and determining comparative values, especially within the (future) decision-making process. These comparisons and comparative values play a role in a wide variety of areas of the debate and process: Beginning with the historical development of global warming and climate change both in a fundamental global sense and in its geographical specification, the determination and inherent comparison of temperature and weather data and their development over the last decades, the comparison of greenhouse gas emissions at the state level, or even previous specific proposals for solutions regarding the all-encompassing change, and finally the comparison between (future) options for action that affect different states as well as specific groups of people or even generations (sometimes at a different level). In this context, comparisons are used by different actors to exert influence on the more or less imagined "other," both individuals and groups that differ in their actions and narratives, particularly concerning to their judgments, experiences, perceptions, decisions, and behavior.

The social process of comparison requires looking at others to define standards that define one's group via the action of other groups that seem to be opposed. These comparison standards are used to "evaluate ourselves and gain information about how [one's own group] should behave, think, and feel" (Baldwin/Mussweiler 2018, E9067). Furthermore, based on these comparison standards, it is not necessarily the groups' or individual's esteem that defines themselves/itself emotionally, but their/its standing relative to others (Baldwin/Mussweiler 2018, E9067). In this context, norms and values, as well as violations of these norms and values, become equally important: more or less strict social norms and, if necessary, sanctions help to overcome insecurities and, above all, to support groups of individuals in acting and performing cohesively (Baldwin/Mussweiler 2018, E9068).

To establish the connection between climate change narratives, comparisons, and action, this paper is guided by the following questions: In what respect are comparisons used in the field of climate change? What do comparisons say about overarching categories such as morality, justice, and equality, or inequality? These overarching questions regarding social and cultural comparison automatically refer to further questions regarding comparisons and climate change: When climate change is defined as human-made, who contributes to it, and who does not? Are there communities that contribute more to climate change and global warming than others? Is there anybody or any group that does not contribute to climate change and global warming? Who must act? Who may demand action? These related questions and comparative values are also used by different actors to generate and demand options for action and to clarify questions of guilt and blame.

In this paper, I will first briefly discuss the extent to which comparison is defined as a social format and a socio-cultural practice that permeates society and influences everyday life. I will then discuss current developments in the climate debate to clarify how language and communication are essential for the debate, to explain how credibility and plausibility are established in debating and comparing the subject. In conclusion, I will take up the aspect of comparison once again to explain how comparison is used to make sense of the changing climate and how comparative values used in this interactive process can be applied to a (comparative) relationship between individual practices and interpretations and the wider societal to transnational debate on climate change, and how comparisons are used in climate change debate to regulate responsibilities and clarify questions of guilt and blame, especially with regard to the moral discourse on options for action, as well as to draw up possible courses of action for a climate-friendly future.

Comparison as a Social Practice

Comparison is an intrinsic human practice and a focal human concern. It is used to show others—by using others—how to make sense of ourselves, our main social group, and our social world. It is "a way of working with differences and similarities between people, objects, concepts, feelings, and other sorts of things (Sørensen/Marlin/Niewöhner 2018, 148). Comparisons are "never neutral: they are inevitably tendentious, didactic, competitive, and prescriptive" (Radhakrishnan 2013, 16). They are not only part of everyday life; rather, they are an essential, natural, and central social practice and basic operation of social life (Heintz 2016, 305-306). As a cultural technique, comparisons are used as a way to position oneself, to place oneself in relation to others, and to differentiate oneself and thus to locate oneself in a social-spatial context (Amelang/Beck 2010; cf. Groth 2019, 240). They facilitate thinking in diverse areas such as person perception, emotion, attitudes, and problem-solving (Baldwin/Mussweiler 2018, E9072).

Furthermore, comparisons have become a central element of public communication. No matter if it is about comparisons of states, universities, cities, movements, parties, or people and their popularity, performance, scientific appeal, or even plausibility, the communicative process about these comparisons and their underlying comparative values is an all-encompassing part of human behavior. Stefan Groth, therefore also understands comparisons as an everyday practice with social, cultural, material, cognitive, and linguistic dimensions and through which everyday life is ordered, but also coped with (Groth 2019, 240). He uses the phrase "doing comparison" to show that comparisons are applied in the most diverse areas of life and dimensions, also as—following Thomas Hengartner's idea of "Doing Transformation" (2016)—a habituated way of dealing with change (Groth 2019, 239).

However, according to Heintz, two conditions must be met in order for meaningful comparisons to be made: first, the subjects to be compared must be classified as comparable, that means assigned to the same categories, and second, there must be criteria and procedures for comparison, based on which differences can be developed (Heintz 2016, 307). Thus, comparisons are based on two aspects that converge empirically, but which must be distinguished analytically according to Heintz: on the one hand, the aspects are comparable through categorizations. On the other hand, they are differentiated from each other by means of the observed and evaluated comparison. In principle, comparisons can result in differences between the two aspects, but equality is also a possible outcome of comparative practice (Heintz 2016, 307).

During the comparison process, aspects are related to each other to create and consolidate order. This ordering function of comparisons as a social and cultural practice is, to a large extent and similar to storytelling, a communicative-performative action, enacted in communication. The climate change debate is one example where this can be observed. In this paper I will discuss how comparisons are used in the communicative process by certain groups to construct categories and criteria of plausibility and credibility. I will do this by using specific empirical examples from two fields, on the one hand, protest and nonviolent resistance by the social movements "Fridays for Future" and "Extinction Rebellion," and on the other hand the so-called leadership training of the "Climate Leadership Program."[13] As part of these categorization efforts, comparisons are used to point out and establish differences between states, organizations, groups, and individuals, while at the same time featuring in highlighting similarities within these specific sets of actors.

The Climate Change Debate

Climate change has become one of the most pressing issues of our time. Increasing air and ocean temperatures, altered weather conditions, and rising sea levels are affecting the globe with profound consequences. These consequences are part of an ongoing and conflicting debate that is conducted by different groups. Some of these groups have differentiating views on the causes of climate change and its consequences but other views are similar, and other groups have views that are completely opposed to these others and their views.

Nevertheless, most of these groups—apart from the skeptics—believe one thing: Climate change has a lasting impact on all social, cultural, economic, and political areas of our society, and—more importantly—climate change is human-made. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the multilateral body of the United Nations in charge of providing the world with an objective, scientific information of human-induced climate change, reported in 2013[14]:

> [The] [w]arming of the climate system is unequivocal, and since the 1950s, many of the observed changes are unprecedented over decades to millennia. The atmosphere and ocean have warmed, the amounts of snow and ice have diminished, sea level has risen, and the concentration of greenhouse gases have increased. (IPCC 2014, 4)

The IPCC publishes assessment reports at irregular intervals since 1990. Currently, six reports are available, as well as several special reports on specialized topics (renewable energy, global warming, extreme events, and disasters). The IPCC does not carry out the research itself nor does it monitor climate-related data, but collects and publishes current results compiled by a large number of international scientists. The aforementioned and quoted fifth report, published in 2013, was compiled by 800 authors in three working groups. The report's main findings are that climate-scientists overwhelmingly agree that humans are causing recent global warming. It is established that

> [h]uman influence on the climate system is clear. […] [It] has been detected in warming of the atmosphere and the ocean, in changes in the global water cycle, in reductions in snow and ice, in global mean sea level rise, and in changes in some climate extremes. This evidence for human influence has grown since AR4 [Assessment Report 4, VF]. It is *extremely likely* that the dominant cause of the observed warming since the mid-20th century (emphasis in original). (IPCC 2014, 15, 17)

Furthermore, the report concludes that "continued emissions of greenhouse gases will cause further warming and changes in all components of the climate system" (IPCC 2014, 19). This result implies the call for urgent and timely action to minimize global warming, even if "[m]ost aspects of climate change will persist for many centuries even if emissions of CO_2 are stopped" (IPCC 2014, 27). The report reflects the conviction of 97.1 percent of climate scientists who represent a consensus on anthropogenic global warming (Cook et al. 2013; Cook et al. 2016; Hulme 2009a; Hulme 2009b; Norgaard 2011).

However, paradoxically the world lives in a sharp and growing separation between climate science, climatology, and everyday life. Even as the scientific consensus grows, it appears as if part of the public is losing interest in the subject. Furthermore, the conflict between the prospect of a fundamentally changed climate—not only in the near future but also in the current climate—and almost constant references to everyday priorities is increasingly becoming the defining feature of our time. Bridging this conflict and overcoming division has become the key and growing priority for the 21st century. The task requires a comprehensive transformation of the structures of meaning, and this is primarily a cultural task in which comparison is used frequently, both by scholars and by actors in the field. In this respect, comparisons are also brought into the discussion in a conflictual manner. What I mean with conflictual discussion or discourse and furthermore with social comparison as a defining category in this field is that above all, the question of the causes, the anticipated courses of action for society and the everyday options for action are in conflict with each other and additionally are compared with each other.

There are several reasons for this: for one thing, global warming and climate change are abstracted from everyday experience. Global warming and climate change are happening now, and the phenomena are continually affecting our everyday life and living environments. However, in the end, it is still difficult to link causes, impacts, and effects. Typically, for example, weather conditions change daily, driven by a variety of factors, and just because of that, these changes do not stand out that much. At least they did not use to stand out that much—this aspect is currently undergoing significant changes. Beyond that, another reason is that the social tipping points and elements[15] of climate change are global in nature, historical in their logic, and projected (far) into the future, therefore it appears to be "easy" to compare these drivers with each other.

The causes of climate change are socio-political, but the responsibility is conveyed by irresistible biophysical forces far removed from the realm of experience. As an explanation: The actual change in the climate is caused by a biophysical change. In the 20th and 21st centuries, however, this change cannot be defined as "natural," but is instead a result of socio-political events and decisions of the last 150 years, to put it in an exaggerated form, from industrialization to globalization. Accordingly, climate change is also defined as anthropogenic; and even if the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) links anthropogenic emissions "with a high level of confidence" with current and future weather changes, the everyday experience with these changes is mostly intangible.

Even if some aspects seem to be unclear, large parts of the scientific community, the media, and politics argue because global warming and thus climate change must be classified as anthropogenic, both individuals and societies must do something to contain global climatic changes. Large sections of society share this view and believe that measures must be taken to mitigate climate change despite (future) uncertainties about the precise aspects of climate change. Wide-ranging forms of committed climate protection are necessary to implement this plan. Future and future practices play an essential role in this context. The term "future practices" implies that people "implicitly or explicitly engage in the making of future" (Esguerra 2019, 963).

With regard to climate change, it is interesting to note even if science plays a vital role in "predicting" the future of climate change, beyond that, it is the generation and negotiation of (climate) knowledge removed from the centers and practices of formal science that has a decisive influence on future practices regarding a climate-friendly future (see also Esguerra 2019, 963–964). In addition to governmental and non-governmental organizations, initiatives, associations, and other organizations, such as "Fridays for Future," "Extinction Rebellion" or "Climate Leadership Programs," support the "activation" of climate actors by encouraging locals to share climate knowledge or initiate climate protection projects. During the last years, especially ever since the Paris Agreement was negotiated in 2015, the discourse on climate change has been rekindled on a larger scale.

The Many Sides of the Climate Change Debate

In the climate debate, at least two fronts seem to collide that are more or less contrary to each other. On the one hand, there are the "believers," and on the other, the "deniers," the climate change skeptics. Whenever a scientist or activist talks about the human causes of climate change, someone else is usually there to provide a "counter-argument." The credibility and plausibility of climate change are discussed, argued, and negotiated in conflicting opinions. These conflicting opinions often leaves the public with the mistaken impression that a genuine debate is taking place between those main groups. Why is that? The problem is that a scientific consensus, but not yet a complete social consensus, shapes the climate debate (Hoffman 2011, 195). Social consensus is a view held by society as a whole—or almost whole—that emerges from individual and social values about what is plausible and credible, and what is true and what is not (Hoffman 2011, 195). Scientists mostly characterize the scientific consensus. The social consensus involves a broader array of actors, including the media, educators, and cultural, economic, and political leaders, and the public in general as well (Hoffman 2011, 195). The process by which these actors understand and assess the science of climate change is not always scientific. Instead, deeply held beliefs and values that are influenced by political ideology (Hoffman 2011, 195) are invoked. When individuals analyze issues such as climate change, they employ socio-cultural, political, and ideological filters heavily influenced by the values and belief systems of the groups to which they perceive themselves to belong (Hoffman 2011, 195). So at least for the moment—recognizable, for example, by contemporary and prominent political figures—there is not yet a complete social consensus. Furthermore, during the last years, the divide between those groups has widened.

However, there is also a widening gap inside the first group, for example between scientists and politicians, conservatives and liberals, politicians and the public, or between the young and the old. Inside this group, there are internal and conflicting debates on the consequences of climate change and, above all, on what needs to be done now and not in a distant future. Many of these debates firstly emphasize the plausibility and credibility of the arguments, secondly the comparison between locally based groups and their negotiating practices, and the general global debate, and thirdly the comparative values and perspectives on justice, equality, morality, guilt, blame, and value. In the following subsections, I will discuss these aspects in more detail.

Why Language Matters—Ethnography of Communication and Meetings

Before I start with some notes on the comparison of plausibility and credibility, I will provide a few notes on my methodological approach, which refers, on the one hand, to linguistic anthropology and narrative research and, on the other hand, to meeting ethnography. Linguistic anthropology is the study of "language in context" (Groth 2012, 17). It focuses on the "speakers of a given language or the participants in a speech community and their communicative interactions," as well as "on the interaction by use of language, and the social functions of language" (Groth 2012, 17). The interconnectedness of the participants, the so-called speech community, is the main focus of research, especially with regards to specific rules like language use, and a shared understanding of communicative interaction and interpretation (Groth 2012, 18). Following Duranti (1997), Groth outlines three central concepts for linguistic anthropology, through which communication but also narration as a performative act of speech can be analyzed, namely performance, indexicality, and participation (Groth 2012, 17). Performance refers to the extent to which language is used as a tool of communication. Indexicality refers to the social functions of language, and the intentions of speakers and participation refer to the interrelationship of language use, communicative events, and membership of a social group (Duranti 1997, 14-20; see Groth 2012, 17-18).

These aspects are important for meeting ethnography as well because meetings are where the action and where the language or communication is (Sandler/Thedvall 2017, 1). In meetings, power is produced and enacted, dynamics of identity and hierarchy are negotiated, and organization is produced, determined, and challenged (Sandler/Thedvall 2017, 1). Therefore, one of my main questions is which role comparison plays at meetings and group events with meeting-character, such as alternative climate schools, workshops, and protest camps, especially regarding the power and dynamics of plausible knowledge production, value production, and negotiation practice.

The specific nature of ethnographic field research offers the possibility of gaining insights into the relationship between climate and culture through a long-term and "multi-sited" approach. My field research for the project "How to Train Climate Active/Conscious Citizens. A Study of Climate Leadership and Agency" took place mainly in Bonn and Berlin[16]. Meetings, and the communication process, were central to all my field visits. The research project examines from a cultural-anthropological perspective how governmental and non-governmental organizations and climate leadership programs produce climate knowledge together with experts and climate activists. Furthermore, the project assesses the ways how these (global) actors transfer the knowledge through initiatives, programs, and protests, and how local actors sustainably shape their everyday lives along with this transferred knowledge.

In 2017, before the official start of my project, I was an accredited participant of the Conference of the Parties (COP23) in Bonn. In 2018 I trained as a climate leader in Berlin, and since 2019, I have been participating in the actions of the Bonn local groups of "Fridays for Future" as well as "Extinction Rebellion." On the next few pages I will show an example from my ethnography which centers on the global social movement "Fridays for Future" that shows the use of comparisons from different perspectives and clarify to what extent comparisons, on the one hand, refer to dichotomies like young vs. old, global South vs. global North, etc., which produce differences. On the other hand, comparing creates not only differences but also similarities, especially when the common ground is highlighted and reduced to a consensus through the communicative process and the process of knowledge generation and acquisition in meetings or events with meeting character.

Credibility, Plausibility and Comparative Values

The question of credibility and plausibility plays a role in climate change communication and beyond that in terms of comparisons as social and cultural practices. Every time a particular aspect or argument within the debate is compared or even contested, the following questions must be asked: when is a report, statement, or story on climate change considered credible or not? In other words, what criteria must be met for a report, a story to be considered credible? Who decides? Can the same story, the same report be classified as credible by specific recipients and untrustworthy by others? Moreover, how can credibility be achieved in media reports, statements, and stories or within the whole debate?

The narrative researcher Gary Alan Fine, in cooperation with other colleagues, has dealt with this question with regard to narration (Fine 1995; Fine/Khawaja 2005; Fine/Difonzo 2011). For him, the dynamics and structure of credibility depend on the interplay of several factors that overlap in several ways in the practice of narration: the narrator, the narrative content, the narrative context, and the audience (Fine 1995). Depending on how these factors relate to each other, the same narrative can be considered or described as a true event or fact, a credible and plausible narrative, wild speculation, and finally, a deliberate invention (Fine 1995). However, Fine not only asks for the credibility of a story or report but he also asks, how plausible is the content? Fine introduces a second term here, which is important. While credibility depends on the person or the source, plausibility refers to the content of what is communicated (Fine 1995). According to Fine and Difonzo, the evaluation of plausibility and credibility is socially produced and evaluated (Fine/Difonzo 2011, 17): "We judge plausibility by the responses of friends and acquaintances, filtering our own belief through trust in their local knowledge. We activate social networks and participate in collective sense-making" (Fine/Difonzo 2011, 18). Furthermore, they state that "[p]lausibility is not only personal but is tied to our common experiences; credibility is not only cognitive but depends on our social capital. Both depend upon the communities in which we participate" (Fine/Difonzo 2011, 18).

This view on narrative research defined by Fine and others can be applied to climate change communication and the debate, which happens both in digital space and in physical space, here especially in meetings or even protest actions. Here, too, it clarifies who is taking part in the debate, what content is being contributed, what the context is, and who the audience is. Furthermore, the importance of communicative interaction and interpretation in meetings, as well as the negotiation of plausibility and credibility, can be seen in the production of comparative values and politics or comparisons in general in the climate change debate. For example, in the sciences the theoretical comparison of climate policies happens on four levels: positions taken in international negotiations; ratification or non-ratification of international treaties; adoption of domestic programs to abate climate change (whether or not in response to international treaties); and "street-level" implementation of those programs (Harrisson/Sundstorm 2007, 3).

In this context, comparison is often based on different value systems with regard to the question of who—which state, which community, which (local) group—must do what to tackle climate change or to take action (with regards to the public) as well as on the credibility and plausibility of the specific arguments. A short example: at the moment, there is something like a (post)colonial North and South debate about whose task it is to do more to combat climate change: industrialized nations, emerging economies, and developing countries? This debate is primarily about the different degrees of being affected by and responsible for anthropogenic climate change, and questions of guilt and assignment of blame are being discussed: Is it simply a question of who exactly is responsible for the current and drastic changes in the climate and who is primarily responsible for organized action and implementation as well as financial backing.

In this context, the historically high emissions of greenhouse gases in the industrialized countries and the associated increase in prosperity and growth are linked to the current situation of emerging economies and developing countries. Furthermore, global power structures, in particular, play a role, making international meetings, negotiations, and communication in general on this issue so difficult, as has been seen at every climate conference in recent years. Especially concepts like justice, (in)equality, guilt, blame, temporalities, and moral values and the comparative perspectives on these concepts are of interest in this specific debate. In short, climate change as a global problem with varied local implication generates a moral and ethical debate.

What does that mean in detail? Hulme states that "[c]limate change is used as a battleground between different philosophies and practices of science and between different ways of knowing" (Hulme 2009b, 42). I would add to this, not only science and knowledge regimes matter in this context, but also the process of interpretation of scientific findings on the causes of climate change, the measurable effects of change, and the options for action that follow. Climate change is an area that generates levels of uncertainty, especially in public opinion. The problem is that the scientific consensus on the anthropogenic causes of climate change translates into numbers, equations, or models that are only partially understood by the majority of the population, if at all. Hulme argues that the arguments of the scientific consensus revolve around the "accuracy of data, the validity of models, and the integrity of scientists" (Hulme 2009b, 42). This means that speaking from a western point of view, the way the consensus is presented, it seems to be objective and politically neutral.

However, it only appears impartial and neutral. Rather, it is the case that scientific results also reproduce certain patterns that point to differences in interpretation, modes of meaning, and possibly also miscommunication between certain groups. For example, Heather M. Yocum (2016) analyzed that "contemporary efforts to account for climate change often preference [sic!] the perspectives of the Western-educated, urban, and affluent technocrats that contribute to their creation" (cf. Isenhour/O'Reilly/Yocum 2016, 649). An example: if in the climate debate CO2-emissions are contextualized historically, and historical emissions (of industrialized countries) are compared with current emissions (of the developing countries), and this is done from a Western perspective, the climate debate gets into an imbalance. This currently unbalanced and uneven method of comparing the accounting for climate responsibility results in the reproduction of global inequality and injustice, but also asks about responsibility in the moral sense (cf. Isenhour/O'Reilly/Yocum 2016, 649).

The process of assessing credibility and plausibility is important when responsibility in the moral sense is interpreted from a variety of perspectives, not only from the Western perspective. In general, one can say that climate is thought of in moral categories which are used to clarify further the meanings of credibility and plausibility of certain arguments—and narrative codes—to gain the upper hand in the debate: starting with the question regarding responsibilities (i.e., developed against developing countries), up to the stigmatizing of people who inhabit certain regions and zones (i.e., poverty and marginalized groups in affected regions), and the moralistic deployment of climatic imaginings (i.e., the dying polar bear on the melting ice floe).

This aspect makes the climate debate, and also the negotiation of climate knowledge, even more complicated. Kirsten Hastrup states that the

> modern (largely national) moral order is inadequate for dealing with the implications of climate change, including the dispersal of cause and effect in both time and space, the increasingly skewed vulnerabilities, and not least the intergenerational responsibility that distributes subjects (agents) and objects (victims) of actions in time. (2015, n.p.)

Ethical considerations and attributions and also decisions based on them must be reconsidered and renewed in the course of the climate debate, especially concerning the concrete connection with current global situations from which people must develop options for action for the future.

Climate Knowledge and Professional Climate Training

How can the aforementioned aspects of the production of credibility and plausibility be applied to the comparative relationship between (local) individual practices and interpretations regarding climate change and the broader social debates on climate protection and change? To what extent does the negotiation of credibility and plausibility contribute to supporting rather than initiating changes in social practices? Furthermore, using the example of a current climate activism issue, how are social comparisons in the climate debate used to regulate responsibilities and clarify questions of guilt and blame in a generational sense? Especially regarding the moral discourse on options for action, and to develop options for action for a climate-friendly future.

The first example from my field research takes us to the "Climate Reality Project." The project is a non-governmental organization founded in 2011 by former U.S. Vice President Al Gore. It is committed to build a global climate protection movement. In addition to using modern communication tools, it focuses on the training of so-called "Climate Leaders". Since 2006, Gore has been training spokespersons for the project worldwide. These "Climate Leaders" learn to pass on the multimedia presentation Gore has developed on human-made global warming. In addition, the leaders are taught to take on leading roles in climate protection in their communities with so-called "Acts of Leadership." To date, a total of 20.967 climate leaders from over 154 countries have been trained to advise groups and persons, such as managers, schoolchildren, religious communities, and political decision-makers at all levels, about climate change, and encourage them to take action.

With regard to the negotiation of climate knowledge, as well as the plausibility and credibility of climate change arguments, participation, community spirit, professionalization, and a certain elite building play a role in this context. I myself trained as a climate leader in 2018 as part of my field research. I had to apply for a place in advance. Participation was free of charge, only travel and accommodation costs had to be paid by the participants themselves. Here is a short excerpt from my observation protocol:

> The first thing I see when I enter the Maritim Hotel is a large crowd of people. Nearly all of them followed the desired dress code. I see hardly no jeans, only skirts, pants, blouses and shirts. The business casual look has definitely prevailed. Directly to the right of the entrance is the registration, there are a lot of people standing there; but—I notice quickly—the start is well organized, and I get my Climate Reality Leadership Corps manual handed out after only a few minutes. A little bit lost, I follow the crowd into the big hall, where I quickly find my round table via the number on my name plate. Proudly I was told during the registration that the table numbers will change every day. This way everyone will have the chance to be very close to the makers, among others Al Gore. The atmosphere is almost euphoric. Everybody is looking for their table neighbors, talking to each other, talking and getting to know each other. At my table there are mainly people from the Cologne-Bonn region, but we speak mainly English with each other, since not only people with German language skills are sitting at the table. Everything seems very "American" to me. I can't explain it exactly, but everyone seems very cheerful, communicative, and exuberant. We play a game to get to know each other: the goal is to find out similarities and differences in origin, profession, and knowledge. I quickly realize that the main goal is to define a common feeling, to talk about one own's plausible views on climate change, and to support the development of common ideas. I am curious to see how the training will develop. (Observation protocol, Climate Reality Corps Training, Maritim Hotel, Berlin, 26.07.2018)

The "Climate Leadership Training" is characterized on the one hand by the climate knowledge of those interested in climate change and checking their arguments for plausibility and credibility. According to the idea of the training, this negotiation of knowledge and the verification of the arguments must be followed by specific action. Accordingly, knowledge generation and negotiation and active participation during and after the training run parallel to each other, but are also dependent on and follow each other. Participation is a knowledge-based activity controlled by the acquisition of competencies, a practical skill in which knowledge and understanding are central. Climate-interested people and activists can therefore contribute to existing knowledge in the training, in discussions, but also generate new knowledge. They anticipate a future in which it is important to convey plausibility and credibility. The aim is always to be able to pass on the collected knowledge after the training, and indeed to have to do so in order to bring about change.

On the other hand, in addition to the use of climate knowledge concerning the professional organization of the training, the sometimes-complicated application process in the lead up to the training and the non-public framework of the event, a certain elite formation is implied. This is further reinforced by the symbolic end of the event: At the end of the training, all trainees are ceremonially presented with a certificate and a pin. This is very formally organized: The responsible table mentors hands out the official certificate and pin. The group celebrates each graduate with loud clapping and cheering. At the same time, a photo is taken as soon as the pin is attached. The final note of the day is identical to the inscription on the pin: "Wear this pin as a symbol of our commitment to help spread the reality of the climate crisis. Wear it, and you are taking a stand for action. Wear it, and together we can change the world." (Observation protocol, Climate Reality Corps Training, Maritim Hotel, Berlin, 28.07.2018) Here, too, it is clear that the community of climate leaders is set at the center. As is the common identifying mark, the pin, through which all leaders can recognize each other and in turn enable joint action with a common identification and the same plausible and credible arguments.

The Question of Generational Justice

The second example from my field work shows a slightly different aspect. Almost two decades ago a significant hurdle to climate research was identified: a disparity between the global standpoint, typically based on a descriptive reliance on objectivity and distance to gain knowledge, and the local standpoint, characteristically based on an interpretive understanding founded on immersion in place and the insider need to know (Malone/Rayner 2001, 175-176). This disparity continues to exist. Above all, similar to the global (policy) level, the question "who has to do what and who is allowed to speak when and where" (again regarding the comparative perspectives on justice, (in)equality, morality, guilt, blame, and value) is of interest here.

To clarify and to show the connecting lines, I give you an example from my fieldwork. In a series of studies in different fields, I investigated the production and negotiation of climate knowledge. In the fields, comparisons were used to emphasize the importance of mitigating climate change and thinking of the future especially, concerning generational justice.

The example brings us to the global social movement "Fridays for Futures." One person who must be named in this regard is Greta Thunberg. Greta Thunberg is a Swedish representative of the international climate protection movement, in particular, the international movement "School Strike for the Climate" or "Fridays for Future," as the movement is called in Germany, among others, and an internationally recognized climate activist.[17] In mid-2018, Thunberg began actively campaigning for climate protection in public. On August 20th, 2018, the first school day after the holidays, Thunberg placed a sign with the inscription "Skolstrejk för klimatet" in front of the Swedish Parliament in Stockholm. At first, she acted alone. On the very first day, there were already media reports on Thunberg's campaign. At the same time, Thunberg published photos of her action on her Twitter account, which were also used in the media. In Germany, the newspaper *taz* published its first report on August 27th. According to the reports, both her parents and her teachers criticized her strike but did not stop it. She carried out this school strike daily until the election of the Swedish Parliament on September 9th, and after the election, she carried on with her strike once a week on Friday, and this strike is still going on (both analog and digital). Later she found imitators, first in Sweden, where pupils soon joined her protest in front of the town halls of other Swedish municipalities, and later in other countries, including Belgium, France, Finland, and Denmark. Currently, she is probably one of the best known and most influential—as well as criticized—teenagers in the world.

The global coordination group of the "School strike for climate" announced the following agenda:

> We, the young, are deeply concerned about our future. […] We are the voiceless future of humanity. We will no longer accept this injustice. […] We finally need to treat the climate crisis as a crisis. It is the biggest threat in human history and we will not accept the world's decision-makers' inaction that threatens our entire civilization. […] Climate change is already happening. People did die, are dying and will die because of it, but we can and will stop this madness. […] United we will rise until we see climate justice. We demand the world's decision-makers take responsibility and solve this crisis. You have failed us in the past. If you continue failing us in the future, we, the young people, will make change happen by ourselves. The youth of this world has started to move and we will not rest again. (Global coordination group 2019)

The German subgroup followed with the following statements and demands:

> Fridays For Future calls for the implementation of the Paris Accord targets and the 1.5°C target. All decisions made so far are taken at the expense of poorer regions and future generations and these decisions are unacceptable […]. They call for immediate action on all levels, for climate justice and the responsibility towards the environment and future generations. (Fridays for Future 2019)

Overall, both groups demand immediate action at all levels for climate justice, equality, and responsibility towards the environment and future generations. In all these statements, we find explicit and implicit comparisons to the inactivity of older generations. The young students compare themselves and their actions with the ineffective action or inaction of the generations before them. These generations are called out by the students. Furthermore, they are judged, often quite harshly judged. The concept of the enemy "number one" that is repeatedly compared to is the politicians and, to a certain extent, the climate lobby—in general, the older generation. In this comparison with the so-called older, inactive generation the first issue is the missing productivity and agency itself—"you have failed us in the past". This is immediately followed by a call for action for the creation of a long-term and climate-friendly future—"We finally need to treat the climate crisis as a crisis"—, shaped by the activists as well as by the older generation. The second issue is that the students examine the arguments of the older generation in order to point out grievances: the communicative process, storytelling about climate change and the limitations that the younger generation, the activists, will experience sooner rather than later, and negotiating the plausibility and credibility of the older generation's arguments all play a role here.

Intergenerational Comparison as a Seemingly Dichotomization of Guilt and Blame

However, this dichotomy of young and old described here cannot be generalized in its entirety. In the course of the global climate protests, support groups were quickly formed in solidarity, including the Parents for Future, Scientists for Future, and Entrepreneurs for Future. These groups join in the intergenerational comparison and thus show their support and solidarity with the youth of "Fridays for Future." This aspect emphasizes that the dichotomous use of intergenerational comparison refers less to a binary understanding of generational justice and agency, but must instead be evaluated in the communication process as a narrative code. Using the code "generational comparison," the debate, which appears undifferentiated, is brought down to a more differentiated level.

Therefore, the demands of "Fridays for Future" and the support groups as well imply ethical-moral questions, the very aspect described by Hastrup as intergenerational responsibility, which is also discussed by "Fridays for Future" activists. After all, it is argued, the time of their lives will be affected by the changes. However, these ethical-moral questions are not to be understood as normative ethics, but rather as descriptive ethics, through which, firstly, credibility and plausibility are produced. Secondly, the question of guilt and blame is defined and, thirdly, actions proposed as a result are legitimized.

In this context, a further comparison comes to mind: In 1992, during the first COP in Rio de Janeiro, 12-year-old Severn Suzuki delivered a speech that garnered worldwide attention and gained her the moniker "the girl who silenced the world for six minutes." In her speech, Suzuki appealed to the attending politicians, lobbyists, activists and so on that the adults have no idea how to fix things, in fact, cannot fix them, and that the old must change their ways: "If you don't know how to fix it, stop breaking it." (Suzuki 1992) In retrospect, more than twenty years later, nothing seems to have changed, and again there are children and teenagers who ask adults to finally change something. This time, however, not (only) in the negotiation room, but on the street and in the collective as well.

In both cases—Thunberg or "Fridays for Future" and Suzuki—questions of guilt and possibly shame or blame are implied. If not by the activists, at least by the figureheads, but it can definitely be deduced from sentences like these:

> They say, go to school, learn something, then you can save the world in ten years. They

> went to school twenty years ago. And their innovations, ideas and non-actions haven't achieved anything yet. We have to strike now and they have to act now. Something they haven't done before. […] Don't stop demanding! We demand that they act for climate justice NOW. (Observation protocol, Fridays for Future, Alternative Climate School, Bonn, Münsterplatz, 12.4.2019)

Or:

> Physical presence and mental presence. Everyone knows that. Both are possible. Which is worse? You can also say that about politicians. Politicians are physically present, mentally not. (Observation protocol, Fridays for Future, Alternative Climate School, Bonn, Münsterplatz, 12.4.2019)

The speeches aim to show the older generations relatively clearly that it is no longer "five to twelve" but rather already "twelve o'clock" and that action must be taken now, by those who can actually implement policies at the present level and not in the future. The criticism of the striking students voiced by individual politicians is regarded as neither plausible nor credible and is accordingly denied. In this context, the presented arguments fit into the ethical-moral discourse on justice, (in)equality and guilt, here with a strong generational perspective. In this context, narrative-comparative categories are set up here, which are linked to the concept of guilt and shame and which appear and are reproduced in the corresponding narratives, which appear and are reproduced in protest actions, but also meetings, workshops, and basically in all forms of communication.

By now the pupils are supported by university students, and other adults also organized in groups, for example, the "Parents for Future," "Scientists for Future," "Grandparents for Future" and others. During the strike in Bonn on April 12th, 2019 a professor spoke to the students and especially to the adults and adopted the previously mentioned descriptive ethics of dichotomous generational comparison as a narrative strategy in the communication process:

> Why do we let the children do this alone? We are the ones who screwed this up. In the media I hear two opinions 1) yes, that's nice that they do strike and 2) you should go to school. Why? Don't just talk, we have to support them! Why don't the trade unions call for a strike? Why is it said that I have to work? That is a strike. Young people can do it, we adults cannot. (Observation protocol, Fridays for Future, Alternative Climate School, Bonn, Münsterplatz, 12.04.2019)

This solidarity, which also draws on the arguments and ethical-moral discourse already mentioned, shows that the generational conflict is not only fought out between young and old. As mentioned at the beginning, it can be seen that within the group that generally supports the statement that climate change is human-made, a widening gap is developing.

To end the paper with a slightly more uplifting statement, as was said before, comparisons are not only used to point out the differences between groups—for example, the young and the old, or north and south. Similarities can also be pointed out, especially if the comparison can be seen as supporting certain arguments. Thus, the majority of the young girls and women at the Bonn demonstration not only verbally represented the arguments of Greta Thunberg, but they also adapted her style. Numerous participants protested with Greta's pigtails, so they did not only copy her arguments they also copied her style, to underline Greta Thunberg's point of view again. This aspect—the appropriation of specific attributes to strengthen an argument—should not be interpreted as a discrepancy. Instead, it is more of a reinforcing argument that this categorization—the highlighting of similarities as a visualized representation of the argument—as cultural practices is a sign of the overarching strength of the argument.

Conclusion

In the process of rethinking and restructuring the climate change debate, my arguments have shown that comparative values and perspectives on justice, (in)equality and value, as well as a comparative view on the credibility and plausibility of climate change arguments, are keys to the global debates on climate change and the following local action. In the debate, language and narrative power is the power to act. The question "Who has the right of interpretation and to challenge the status quo" is characterized by comparisons—who did what when, especially what was not done, how far is progress, and how far should it be?—to negotiate current levels of power. This paper has shown how comparisons are used in the climate change debate as a way to negotiate norms and values, to regulate responsibilities and clarify questions of certain forms of contested agency as a narrative attribution of guilt and blame, especially with regard to the moral discourse on options for action, as well as to draw up possible courses of action for a climate-friendly future. Communication or communicative-performative actions, such as narration or the use of narrative codes, are decisive for negotiating the arguments of the climate change debates. Meetings and group events with meeting-character, such as alternative climate schools, workshops, and protest camps, are the main venues where these negotiations take place. In meetings, power and the right to interpret is produced and enacted, dynamics of identity and hierarchy are negotiated, and differences and similarities are produced, determined, and challenged. The negotiation of plausibility and credibility is essential throughout, among other things, by comparing positions and arguments, by which the binarity of apparently emerging dichotomies, for example a seemingly existing generational question, is broken down and thus differentiated.

Notes

1 Deutsche Welle, accessed October 20, 2019, https://www.dw.com/de/klima-vom-mu-

sterschüler-zum-sünder/a-44195899.

2 Bundesumweltamt, accessed October 20, 2019, https://www.umweltbundesamt.de/en/indicator-greenhouse-gas-emissions#textpart-1.

3 Bundesumweltamt, accessed October 20, 2019, https://www.umweltbundesamt.de/en/indicator-greenhouse-gas-emissions#textpart-1.

4 Federal climate Change Act, accessed December 23, 2019, https://www.bmu.de/gesetz/entwurf-eines-gesetzes-zur-einfuehrung-eines-bundes-klimaschutzgesetzes-und-zur-aenderung-weiterer-vor/

5 The Paris Agreement is an agreement within the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), dealing with greenhouse-gas-emissions mitigation, adaptation, finance, further issues. It was negotiated by representatives of 196 state parties at the 21st Conference of the Parties (COP21) of the UNFCCC in 2015.

6 Klimapaket der deutschen Bundesregierung 2019, accessed October 20, 2019, https://www.bundesregierung.de/resource/blob/975232/1673502/768b67ba939c098c994b71c0b7d6e636/2019-09-20-klimaschutzprogramm-data.pdf?download=1.

7 Klimapaket der deutschen Bundesregierung 2019, accessed October 20, 2019, https://www.bundesregierung.de/resource/blob/975232/1673502/768b67ba939c098c994b71c0b7d6e636/2019-09-20-klimaschutzprogramm-data.pdf?download=1.

8 “Fridays for Future” (FFF) is a global social movement based on pupils and students who are committed to fast and efficient climate protection measures in order to meet the 1,5 degree target of the United Nations agreed upon at the World Climate Conference in Paris 2015 (COP 21). “Extinction Rebellion” (XR) is an environmental protection movement with the declared goal of enforcing measures by governments against the mass extinction of animals, plants and habitats, as well as the possible extinction of humanity as a result of the climate crisis, by means of civil disobedience I define FFF and XR as social movement according to Charles Tilly (2004). A movement is a social movement when there is a continuous and persistent articulation of protest, a certain level of interaction of the protesters, as well as the expression of the aims and reasons of the protest in a public campaign, and various forms of practices of staging and ritualized presentation of the issues.

9 Thielges, Sonja: Germany’s New “Climate Package“: Too little, too late. economics, October 29, 2019.

10 Renegotiating the Climate Package, accessed December 23, 2019, https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/bundestag-klima-klimapaket-101.html.

11 Energy Transition Index, accessed December 23, 2019, http://reports.weforum.org/fostering-effective-energy-transition-2019/energy-transition-index/energy-transition-index-ranking/.

12 The diesel scandal (also known as dieselgate or the German „Dieselaffäre“) is the combination of a series of predominantly illegal manipulations by various car manufacturers to circumvent legally prescribed limits for car exhaust gases and—in return—political influence to secure them.

13 The Climate Reality Project is an NGO founded in 2011 by former US Vice President Al Gore.

14 The fifth assessment report (AR5) was published as a summary for policy makers on 27 September 2013. On 31 March 2014 followed a second and on 14 April 2014 a third report. The synthesis report was published on 2 November 2014.

15 The term social tipping points is derived from the description of tipping points in biophysical systems: “a critical threshold at which a tiny perturbation can qualitatively alter the state or development of a system“ (Lenton et al. 2008, 1786). A tipping point can be defined

as a relatively sudden social change where the cumulative effect of a set of immediate events and changes results in large-scale, global consequences (Castellani/Hafferty 2009, 196). Tipping elements or social tipping dynamics are "interventions that can activate contagious processes of rapidly spreading technologies, behaviors, social norms, and structural re-organization within their functional domains" (Otto et al. 2020, 2354).

16 It is planned to expand the field research, including research visits to Durham, UK, and New York, USA.

17 The following notes on Greta Thunberg are taken from various media reports, among others: https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/the-fifteen-year-old-climate-activist-who-is-demanding-a-new-kind-of-politics; https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/dec/04/leaders-like-children-school-strike-founder-greta-thunberg-tells-un-climate-summit; https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/ausland/klimaaktivistin-greta-thunberg-mit-16-jahren-schon-ein-phaenomen-16036155.html, January 30, 2020.

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Comparison as Reflective and Affective Practice: Orientations toward the Middle in Recreational Road Cycling

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Abstract

The article discusses comparisons in recreational road cycling and asks how hobby athletes compare themselves and their performances with others. Based on a research project on orientations toward the middle, it focuses on constellations in which belonging to the midfield in sport is interpreted as a positive achievement and goal. The article shows how criteria of comparison are dynamic and negotiated in relation to other athletes and to a range of different motives. It shows how comparisons entail reflective, anticipatory, and affective elements and how available data and subjective estimations about others' performance influence comparative constellations.

Keywords: comparison, sport, cycling, relationality, observing apparatus

How do recreational athletes compare themselves to other athletes? With whom do they compare themselves? On which aspects do they focus, and which elements do they neglect, ignore, or avoid when they put themselves side by side with other athletes? To what extent can an athlete's comparison be understood as a reflective, explicit, and rationalized practice? What about affective, implicit, or anticipatory dimensions of comparison in recreational sport? For the world of sport, one answer to such questions of comparison seems to be obvious: being faster, stronger, better—in short, winning—is the guiding principle, resulting in straightforward results and rankings that differentiate among athletes on the basis of their performance. European ethnologist Hermann Bausinger talks of a "sport of standings" (*Tabellensport*; Bausinger 2015) to reflect on the prevalence of ranked tabular overviews in many sport disciplines. However, the dichotomy of winning and losing inscribed in such rankings and results is more complex than it seems (Stichweh 1990; Groth 2019, 203–7), at least in its absolute form. Despite the vast occurrence of standings in professional sports and increasingly in recreational sport, there are other criteria of comparison that can be more important than winning (Schulze 2005, 259–60). Consider professional cycling. A top-ten result in a big race can be considered a huge achievement and success, bringing prestige and prospects for a good contract with a team or sponsor. Furthermore, many cyclists are employed not for their chances of winning races but for their helper role as *domestiques*. They are not expected the cross the finish line in first place but to support their team leaders in various ways: as water carriers, as lead-out men for sprints, or providing slipstream by riding in front.

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If we turn our view to recreational athletes, the winning/losing dichotomy seems even more problematic. How many recreational cyclists can realistically hope to win a (hobby) race or land a spot on the winner's podium? To what extent are hobby athletes able to train in a way that allows them to compete for a top ten position in a race with hundreds (if not thousands) of participants? Like marathons and other running events, big cycling races for hobbyists have gained in number and popularity in Europe over the past couple of decades. In Germany, races exist with annually more than 20,000 athletes; from spring to early autumn, one has the opportunity to enter at least one race nearly every weekend. For most of the athletes participating in the races, it is not about winning. Other motives are more important: having fun, being fit and healthy, spending time with friends, and enjoying nature (Kaschuba 1989; Wicker et al. 2012; cf. Groth 2014, 44ff.). Nonetheless, their participation in races involves comparing performances with other athletes and with their own prior performances: How does one fare in comparison to cyclists from the same age group, to friends, or to colleagues? Can one do better than last year in the same race?

This article puts the focus on dimensions of comparison in recreational road cycling and asks which aspects come together when hobby cyclists compare themselves with others and with their own performances. Specifically, it aims to shed light on the interplay between reflective, anticipatory, and affective elements of comparison in recreational sports. By "reflective elements," I refer to relatively explicit and rationalized forms of comparison on the basis of information about performances, performance categories, and competitors; by "anticipatory elements of comparison," I refer to the anticipated performances of athletes and their competitors and the influence of such anticipation on competitive orientations. Last, "affective elements" for my purposes are understood as emotions with an effect on how recreational athletes compare themselves and their performances with others. A perspective on such elements of comparison includes a shift from the dichotomy of winning and losing toward a more relational and multidimensional understanding of comparison in sports, including different forms of rankings.

The article achieves this against the backdrop of developments in recreational sports and other fields that frame average performances as positive achievements. Specifically, in recreational road cycling, a rising number of athletes aim at keeping up with the midfield in hobby races, in real and virtual life. Despite spending many hours training and optimizing performance, these cyclists do not take the top as their goal, but instead choose a relational middle. For them, winning—often portrayed as the guiding principle of comparison in sport—is a negligible criterion. I will show which processes of comparison in its different dimensions are involved in such orientations toward the middle and how reflective, anticipatory, and affective elements feature in them. To analyze the impact of these elements on comparison as a social practice in recreational sport, the article starts by outlining orientations toward the middle in this field and contextualizes them as part of broader developments. Subsequently, the article investigates the extent comparison to which is a relational practice that can be used by athletes to make sense of and situate performances in recreational sport.

Elements of explicit reflection and more implicit anticipatory and affective practices of comparison are analyzed. In the conclusion, the interplay between these elements and the influence of rankings as an "observing apparatus" (Sørensen, Marlin, and Niewöhner 2018) are discussed.

Orientations towards the Midfield in Recreational Road Cycling

"Keeping up" with the midfield, achieving middle incomes, or belonging to the middle class are increasingly powerful models for socioeconomic behavior and imaginaries in Germany (Schöneck and Ritter 2019). Recent sociological studies on Germany highlight that the "civil normal biography" is preferred over "excessive luxury" (Calmbach et al. 2016) and that "conformity" with the middle class (Koppetsch 2013) is viewed as a favorable goal. Such orientations toward the middle exist in the sphere of work where sabbaticals, part-time work, and work-from-home schemes as well as work-life balance have become increasingly common and people argue that the professional career is perceived of as less important than a happy and balanced life. The article is based on a broader empirical project on orientations toward the middle in different fields, among them recreational road cycling (Groth 2014, 2019a). The project involved participant observation in hobby races and training sessions, interviews with cyclists and race organizers, and analysis of social media debates as well as cycling publications.

However, positive references to the middle are not limited to work life. In the sphere of leisure, for example, in recreational road cycling as a sport, the orientation toward the middle, toward averages, and toward somewhat "normalized performances" is prevalent as well. Hobby cyclists argue that their motivation is not to win a race or be the best but to achieve good performances relative to friends, their age group, or their own performance in previous years (Groth 2014). Belonging to the midfield is argued to be an achievement of its own and is framed as desirable. Overly extensive training durations and aspirations can even be seen in a negative way in this context. In online fora and on other social media as well as in interviews, hobby athletes argue that very ambitious cyclists should participate in amateur races rather than the popular lower-ranked and leisure-oriented hobby races (*Jedermannrennen*). In the past few years, such races have mostly been won by sponsored teams with support staff and for professional or amateur cyclists—a development criticized as it weakens the traditional amateur races and introduces a highly competitive style of racing in events marketed to more casual cyclists. On the other hand, a significant share of participants in hobby races tries to avoid bad performances. They train regularly, are often part of clubs, invest in new equipment, and aim for "good" results in training and races. While the podium and—in some larger events—even the top 100 of a race is hard to reach, these cyclists seek to better prior performances, outsprint colleagues and friends, or be among the faster cyclists on a climb (Groth 2014). The efforts required to be part of the midfield are nonetheless high, especially in light of professionalized teams in hobby races involving training camps abroad, sponsored bikes and equipment, team coaches, and strategies. Without continuous training efforts, even the midfield is hard to reach.

Accordingly, among a specific group of recreational cyclists, the middle or the midfield is conceived of as positive points of orientation, not as a deficit or failure. There is an immense willingness to compete and perform, added to the sometimes huge training loads of athletes taking part in hobby races. At the same time, their competitive orientation takes only their own performance development (the increase in performance from year to year) as a goal or that of other groups in their social vicinity—the same age group, athletes with similar build and experience, or those in their same club. Orientations toward the top, however, are rare. Thus, in the field of recreational road cycling, one finds what one might call a "competition for the middle" or the midfield with positive demarcations against the top and the bottom. Against the top, a stratification of motives backgrounds absolute competition and foregrounds compensation from stressful work life or health benefits. "Too good" performances associated with quasi-professional teams, former professional riders, or immense training loads—while not discouraged—are viewed with skepticism. The comparative dimensions one finds in this field are relative, such as aiming at bettering one's own time or comparing oneself to similar performance groups or social groups that are seen as realistic. Achieving these relative goals, most importantly belonging to the midfield, is a hard task and connected with many requirements. Against the bottom, there is a strong demarcation against worse athletes, which goes hand in hand with goals to improve one's performance. Aspiring to achieve absolute goals is not deemed to be efficient because this is seen to involve high risk and great efforts; furthermore, one may lack the talent to be one of the best and on the podium. Competition for the midfield in recreational sport is connected with a voluntary restriction to medium goals. The limitation is argued to be a positive choice, leading to enjoyment of races and less pressure to perform. No absolute goals are set in competition with other actors; goals are seen as relative in relation to other actors who are perceived to be comparably strong. Here, the middle can be understood as relational and dynamic: if one's performance improves or one finds less time to train, the perception of medium goals can be lowered or heightened. Yet there is an interplay involved between voluntary self-limitation—being content to belong to the middle—and external constrictions—not being able to achieve more than the middle due to lack of training, talent, or resources.[1]

The "middle" is a powerful concept to structure action and perceptions. Orientations toward the middle in recreational sport and other fields merit deeper scrutiny to show how they are constituted in specific settings and constellations, which discourses they reference, how they relate to debates on competition and performance or how they are referenced to make sense of economic and social conditions. These orientations are a form of social comparative (Nullmeier 2016), a form of orientation that draws a line against the bottom and the top. In contrast to competitions, such orientations seek not the best but a medium position, a "good average" or a "happy medium" with which one is content (or claims to be). They are socially constructed and gain traction through their relation to relevant social categories. Instead of being defined by objective or neutral factors, such as mathematical medians or statistic evidence, they are placed in reference to situated criteria. Friends, family, or colleagues serve as points of reference rather than objective scales. What is understood as the middle is dynamically constructed and is contingent on personal living conditions. A specific sport performance can be perceived of by an individual as more than average at the point of its execution, but after two years of hard training, it might be deemed too low and not appropriate. Expectations and perceptions of the middle change over time and with shifting social conditions. The middle is flexible as it compares positions—in terms of performance and other criteria—to the specific social context. Orientations toward an average are dynamically constructed from subjective points of view—they are not fixed but emerge as negotiations of individual positions, aims, and potential vis-à-vis other actors. In the interviews with recreational athletes I conducted, as well as in publications, online fora, and social media, being part of the midfield is framed as a positive choice and not an external limitation. It is portrayed as an achievement of its own and framed as desirable while overly extensive training durations and aspirations are, in this context, seen in a negative way.

Comparison as Relational Practice

Orientations toward the middle in recreational cycling centrally involve comparative elements. To situate oneself in a position that draws a demarcation against the bottom and the top, others and their performances or assets play a crucial role. They have to be at least tangentially observed, acknowledged, or heard of. As Fochler, Felt, and Müller (2016) argue, this is not limited to the phenomena compared but stretches to other interests and motives as well. In this sense, comparisons are connected to other criteria, and processes of everyday comparison are not isolated from other spheres of life. Instead, comparators and criteria are entangled with the lifeworlds of actors. Such a constellation of comparison in which a comparison with other actors is tied to other motives can also be found among recreational road cyclists. Here, a pluralization and personalization of motives can be observed, allowing insights into how different comparative criteria are configured (Groth 2014). Other motives for doing sport—health benefits, relief from work, social contacts, or enjoying nature during bike rides—need to be taken into account as part of a stratification of motives for analyzing situated comparisons. The ideal type of a win/loss coding of sport as a guiding principle of comparison (between winners and nonwinners) does not suffice to grasp the quotidian interpretations of competitive comparison (Groth 2019). When recreational cyclists compare themselves or their performances with others, the process cannot be reduced to isolated indicators, such as the power output one can generate over a defined time. Such indicators exist, for example, in the form of "functional threshold power" as the maximum power output (in watts) a cyclist can sustain for one hour. Although this measure can be compared among athletes, "pure" comparisons of performance indicators need to be contextualized with regard to individual biographies, motives, interests, and social configurations. Recreational cyclists with a background in high-performance sports with immense training loads and striving for a top position in races compare themselves differently than do athletes who started late with the sport and exercise primarily to be with friends and to decompress from a busy work life. Thus, comparisons are not just a technique of distinction between winning and losing or being better or worse but an instrument of relating actors that positions them in the social field in relation to other actors, their motives, and backgrounds.

In contemporary recreational road cycling in Germany, the process of relation building includes social-comparative orientations among athletes, where placings in the midfield are aspired to. Here, comparisons can be directed at different sets of criteria or categories. One's self can be at the center of comparison when current performances are compared to prior times: results can be tracked over time and compared to gauge whether individual capabilities have changed. In these cases, being better than last year or being faster on a climb than weeks earlier can be conceived of as a success, even if one only places in the midfield and is far off the results of better athletes. Furthermore, athletes from my research project regularly refer to their social vicinity when comparing their performances: to friends in cycling clubs, to family members, and to colleagues. Here as well, the constriction or confinement to medium goals is relational with regard to one's lifeworld and less to static or statistical values. Orientations toward the middle can change depending on the situation, for example, with changes in one's circle of friends, one's ability to train, or life situations. In these cases, comparisons are directed at the social environment, that is, at performances or positions in the specific social context. What is understood to be the middle is negotiated subjectively. Comparisons are made in social vicinity, and less in terms of seemingly objective medium values (e.g., with regard to a "functional threshold power"). The social vicinity is not limited to direct contacts but can be extended to contacts from online fora or platforms on which recreational athletes can compare themselves with others (see Krahn 2019). Platforms making performance data available and publicly tracking training efforts, such as Strava,[2] or online results from hobby races give cyclists an opportunity to see how one fares in respective age groups or in comparison with friends. Important here is that actors make a selection of who is viable for comparison based on a variable set of criteria, such as age, weight, a comparable (sport) career or education, or direct or indirect social acquaintance. Not all participants in a race or athletes on an online platform are used for comparison. This would introduce too much complexity—especially in large races or given the immense user base of platforms such as Strava—and result in less meaningful comparisons. While investigating how much faster an ex-professional or a top recreational athlete went up a climb in a hobby race may be of interest, recreational cyclists with orientations toward the midfield can situate and orient themselves in relation to similar and known actors.

Orientations toward the middle are socially comparative in that they are relational and subjective. Accordingly, it is not about fixed criteria of performance but about subjective and situated interpretations and interactions, which are not entirely stable. The middle in recreational road cycling is not a clearly bounded or objectively definable concept. Here, comparison is a social practice with subjective, relational, and situated constructions of comparative criteria that also involves selecting or dismissing specific dimensions of comparison. Thus, not only the criteria of comparison but also other comparators (or phenomena to be compared) are adjusted: with whom does one compare oneself?

Comparison as Explicit Reflection

A selection of "comparable" athletes partly hinges on the social vicinity of actors. The performative abilities of friends and members of the same cycling club are known as a result of shared training rides and races; data about other athletes are available on training platforms and social media. This results in a relative transparency with regard to the performances about others. It includes explicit references to relatively stable sets of criteria of comparison, such as race results, performance tests and categories, and scientific models of performance, allowing for comparability through scales and accumulated data. These criteria pertain to explicit dimensions of comparison—they motivate and enable athletes to figure out who is comparable in terms of performance, age, and background. Furthermore, the criteria confront actors with automatically calculated indicators of their performance or ranking in a specific context to be used for comparisons with others. In such processes, the comparative criteria can partly be explained as the basis for reflecting about performances in relation to others.

One such set of criteria in recreational road cycling is tied to the possibility of quantifying performances and mapping them onto scientific models of sportive potential. Through various performance tests, even hobby cyclists can estimate their potential in terms of power output (in watts) over time. This gives them an indication how well they could do in a race and a comparison with other cyclists: together with their weight, the resulting watts per kilo metric is, in principle, able to accurately predict the time a cyclist needs to climb a certain hill or finish a known course of a time trial, for example. With data and knowledge about training methodology, comparisons of performance among recreational cyclists are connected to (quasi-)scientific models of power output and give indications about how well one will compete in relation to other known or unknown riders (Groth 2014). With the help of various training platforms such as Strava and because performance metrics are shared over social media, these data are observed and quantified as well. Before and in races, such data can be used to estimate how fast one can complete the course, which result (in terms of placement) this could theoretically yield, and what level of performance is needed to place well in the midfield.

Although this reads like a theoretical premise, explicit reflections about potential performances feature strongly in interviews with recreational road cyclists and in online fora, where tips about the best training sessions and estimates of potential improvements are shared. These aspects are incorporated to arrive at more informed (or elaborate) comparisons. By using gadgets like bike computers and sport watches, as well as training and analysis software, recreational athletes can make precise estimations of their potential. Specific tools and software are marketed toward hobby cyclists and are easily available. Some gadgets even allow for an auto-calculation of metrics, such as functional threshold power or maximal aerobic capacity (VO2 max). With using cycling computers, it is possible for athletes to gain insight into "how much is left in the tank" in a specific race situation. Based on energy expended, such calculations inform riders about estimated reserves. In sum, performance tests, references to (quasi-)scientific models, and calculations are used even by recreational cyclists to reflect about their position and adjust comparative dimensions.

By knowing about performative potentials, recreational athletes can adjust and reflect on their expectations and situate themselves in relation to comparable cyclists. More specifically, it enables them to relate to a number of preconfigured categories relevant in road cycling: besides age groups as a central distinguishing category (as is also the case in running, triathlon, and other endurance sports), these categories pertain mostly to different performance categories in races. In recreational road races, different start blocks, and times are used to separate top riders from those interested in a more relaxed experience. Usually, riders from sponsored teams with expectations to finish in a top position take up the first rows at the start line; further back are experienced but slower riders, and beginners are grouped in the back of the field. Riders can partly choose which category or start block to enter by providing information about their performance to race organizers. Yet this reflection about adequate categories can be forced when organizers check race results from prior racers and organize athletes into respective start blocks. Such categorizations can influence comparative constellations when riders are grouped in the front or the back and can cause debates about where riders are placed. This is a frequent topic among athletes who consider this categorization to be unjust or faulty and demand to be put in the front block. Similarly, recreational athletes with aspirations to finish in the midfield can be influenced to adjust their expectations when they are grouped in with top riders.

These categorization processes expand to the realm of online races as well. Over the past several years, the number of cyclists riding on stationary bikes in their homes in virtual environments has increased significantly. Companies such as Zwift[3] provide software solutions in which avatars in virtual worlds replicate cadence, power, and heart rate of riders on their connecting trainers and a tablet or laptop as a display. Originally intended to provide a training opportunity during the winter months, when roads are icy, and conditions are difficult, smart trainers are now popular throughout the year with dedicated race leagues, clubs, and public events. Races at times take place every other hour, enabling cyclists to join competitive events around the clock. Even national championships in virtual cycling have been organized, and professional cyclists participate—even those who can also be found at the start line of stage races like the Tour de France. In virtual races on Zwift, cyclists are automatically categorized based on their performance. "A" riders are the highest ranked, with "B," "C," and "D" categories reserved for weaker riders. If the average power output of a cyclists exceeds a certain amount—for example, the range of category C—the athlete is automatically ranked in category B. Accordingly, athletes are not able to choose but are forced into an adequate category and can be placed from the top in lower-ranked category to the bottom of a higher-ranked category. In such cases, comparative constellations change, and athletes have to adjust to new comparable cyclists.

Anticipatory and Affective Dimensions of Comparison

Apart from such technological and data-driven enablers of comparative configurations, explicit reflections about comparisons entail more subjective references to known competitors, be it in sporting clubs, online platforms, or races. Such comparisons in the social vicinity between athletes are also present in training sessions or more leisurely bike rides. One interviewee stressed that although she is not particularly interested in races and competition and rides mostly for health benefits and as a relief from stressful family and work life, she wants to be better than her training partners in specific situations.[4] Listing a couple of criteria (such as experience, body composition, or perceived fitness), she argued that she subjectively should be better on a specific hill and thus created a situated comparative constellation in which she systematically reflected about her and her opponent's potential. When comparing oneself with others, these criteria are incorporated to arrive at more informed (or elaborate) comparisons. Despite being based on subjective observations of competitors and being explained in interviews, subjective references entail anticipatory and affective elements that are not reflexive in the way the metricized and numerical criteria are. These elements remain implicit. This points to the fact that comparisons in recreational road cycling can involve ephemeral, anticipatory, and affective dimensions. Future developments of performance and future competitive constellations—such as the composition of a race—are anticipated by athletes and taken into account when making comparisons. Available data about performance and subjective estimations about anticipated performances come together. For recreational cyclists, these anticipated performances are tied to a specific observation of difference. For example, if one anticipates that one will perform significantly worse compared with the top or better cyclists in one's social vicinity, the criteria of comparison can be adjusted and "more comparable" athletes (from one's age group or sporting club) can be chosen as a point of reference. Such estimations can be based on knowledge about competitors and on behavior (how other cyclists prepare themselves at the start of the race or how they ride their bike), appearances (such as clothing or a lean or muscular body), and material dimensions (such as the bike).

Estimations of others and their performance are subjective and lead to dynamic anticipations, affecting which other cyclists are perceived as "comparable." Performance categories or metrics as indicators are stable and impartial, but they are always "socially and culturally loaded" (Thedvall 2012). Their impact (or affordance, see Bareither 2019) depends on whether they are understood or accepted to be significant. Accordingly, the impact of subjective estimations, categories, or metrics on comparisons hinges on whether athletes pay attention to them and regard them as important. With regard to orientations toward the middle, cyclists often dismiss absolute rankings and top hobby cyclists as irrelevant for their ambitions and instead focus on comparable athletes and positions. By stressing some dimensions of comparison (e.g., experience, body composition, or perceived fitness), other dimensions are neglected and ignored. Thus, comparisons are a focus and a reduction of contingence, which helps one make a selection by setting comparative criteria and comparators. A selection can be achieved by explicitly reflecting about criteria with reference to scientific models or known factors (e.g., experiencing a competitor or performance metrics).

Such processes of selection are often implicit, spontaneous, and tied to emotions, for example, when negatively connoted dimensions of comparison (such as absolute performance metrics) are neglected and positive aspects are stressed (such as belonging to the midfield). Emotions or affects tied to these selection processes can be rationalized ex post but are different from explicit reflections about comparative criteria. This is especially the case for orientations toward the middle. In my research on recreational road cycling, a number of interviewees changed their comparative criteria based on negative experiences. Some riders were once relatively successful with placings in the top 20s or top 50s of races with more than 1,000 participants. But the "professionalization" of hobby races with sponsored teams and former professional cyclists led to a situation in which the training regime, experience, and talent of recreational cyclists made it infeasible for them to compete with the top. This partly led to explicit reflections about this situation and the consequent shift in comparison—toward the positive understanding of the average or the midfield. It was also closely tied to negative emotions and a refusal to regard the new top cyclists as a viable group for comparison. Such affective dimensions of comparison and the entailing shifts in relational comparisons go beyond a mere rational reflection about negative aspects as comparisons.

Conclusion

Making comparisons is a relational practice in which criteria of comparison and comparators can be adjusted. This article has shown how reflective elements of comparison, based on processes of metrication and apparently objective indicators, as well as anticipatory and affective elements can affect how recreational cyclists compare their performances with others. Emic comparisons in the field of recreational cycling (as well as in other fields) are connected to what Sørensen, Marlin, and Niewöhner call "observing apparatuses" (2018). In the case of cycling, this apparatus consists of processes of quantification, increased transparency, and subjective estimations that feature in constructing comparative categories and shape comparisons. The observing apparatus has a "social form" insofar as it entails subjective knowledge about the abilities of friends, co-riders, or other known athletes. Added to this, platforms like Strava, race results, rankings, online discussions, magazine publications, and the social vicinity to other athletes provide cyclists with broad knowledge about the performative field in which they practice. Cyclists frequently participating in hobby races and practicing the sport as part of a club or with friends are especially well equipped with explicit and implicit knowledge about potential competitors and comparable athletes. The existence of performance data and the knowledge about the performance of others influence how actors compare themselves with others. Publicly available online information about a field of cyclists, race results, and the social proximity of athletes change how athletes make comparisons. The comparative regime in recreational road cycling, including processes of categorization and the possibility of measuring performance capabilities, brings about new aspects and constellations of comparison, much like Marilyn Strathern has shown for audit cultures (Strathern 2003). Some indicators are objectified to a certain extent as the result of automatic categorizations, metrics such as functional threshold power, or rankings in virtual and real racing. Automatic categorizations of cyclists into different groups in online racing and hobby races affect comparative constellations and force athletes to reflect on their positions. Likewise, they can lead to the dismissal of comparative relations when they are tied to negative emotions.

Everyday comparisons in recreational cycling can be understood as practices in which decisions are taken and rationalized but where anticipatory and affective dimensions also play a role. The interplay between these dimensions of comparison and the effects of specific observing apparatuses needs to be taken into account when analyzing comparative constellations. This is especially the case for orientations toward the middle, which mediate between external pressures and constrictions on the one hand and voluntary limitations on the other. In recreational road cycling and in other fields, affective dimensions can lead to a backgrounding of unwanted elements of comparison and a focus on explicit reflections about comparative parameters or about positive affective elements—such as belonging to the midfield or achieving average incomes and performances. This requires attention to affective dimensions of comparisons and, closely connected, ethnographic insight to identify them.

Notes

1 This interplay can also be observed in the spheres of work and housing. The fields in which notions of happy mediums and good averages are referenced are very diverse and connected to diverging logics of practice, interpretations, and structural specificities. But the notions themselves stem from similar debates and discourses and share many commonalities—from the sphere of work with sabbaticals or notions of work-life balance; the sphere of housing with references to sustainability, decluttering, and minimalism; to the sphere of sport and positive attributions to the midfield.

2 https://www.strava.com.

3 https://www.zwift.com.

4 This is a recurring topic in the interviews I conducted with recreational road cyclists. Whereas noncompetitive motives are highlighted as reasons for practicing the sport, ephemeral competitive stimuli in specific situations—such as riding up an incline in training with other cyclists—are described as exceptions (see Groth 2014).

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Issue Response

Comparing and Being Compared: Choice and Power in Everyday Comparisons Under Neoliberalism

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In 1960, after defecting from Poland and spending some years in the agitation of the Western European émigré community, the poet Czeslaw Milosz made his way to an academic position at the University of California, Berkeley. There he found himself temporarily paralyzed by the absence of direction regarding his professional activities: there was nothing to resist, no constraint to give him shape (1990). My American students, reading of this in a graduate seminar in the late 1990s, were confused. Surprise followed when the two international students, from Turkey and Serbia respectively, simultaneously shook their heads, opened their mouths, and said, "You need walls." Both women then cited examples to argue that a sudden collapse of constraint might not just disorient intellectuals but drive them to seek security in extremist nationalism or fundamentalism.

Lowering the tension, the Serbian student went on to describe her own introduction to the Land of Opportunity, as, newly arrived in Ohio, she went out to purchase basic supplies. "I grew up in a Communist country," she explained. "There was just -- shampoo." Now she found a whole aisle of it, different brands, different colors, different scents, and, most mysteriously, varieties targeted to customers with different kinds of hair: normal, dry, oily, treated, curly. (The further nuance of race-targeted marketing was not obvious to her at that stage.) She got worried: how could she find out whether her hair was normal or not, and what would be the consequences if she bought the wrong bottle?

Everyone laughed at this. The foreigner's comparative perspective allowed even natives to recognize the absurdity of a characteristic American experience: standing paralyzed in a big-box store before an overwhelming array of lightly differentiated alternatives, with insufficient information to determine which differences matter among all those that are manifestly trivial. At about this same period, the American sociologist Barry Schwartz was identifying and labeling the phenomenon, resulting in his book *The Paradox of Choice* (2004). Such a vaulting into theory is a characteristic academic move. The lateral move of comparison is, however, the way that most us escape habitus most of the time. In encountering an alternative, we discover that some taken-for-granted everyday procedure can be organized differently: a startling, sometimes upsetting realization.[1] The insight can arise from a personal experience of mobility or be achieved in conversation across positions. It can come from direct observation or vicarious engagement--hence the importance of fiction in the formation of contemporary selfhood.

The accounts of everyday comparison in this special issue of *Cultural Analysis* elaborate the implications of the shampoo story, opening them from the microcosm of consumer choice toward primary realms of engagement for actors in contemporary wealthy societies: work, family, politics, and leisure. Like the shampoo story, the articles by Petersson, Böstrom,

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and Öhlander and by Siim highlight international, intercultural experience as a source of insight into societal particularities as well as perplexity over personal options. Like the shampoo story, the articles by Flor and Groth highlight the play of power and competition in acts of comparison. More specifically, they uncover something that might be diagnostic of everyday comparison under neoliberalism: the interplay between comparing and being compared, between individual preferences and societal rankings. Recalling the context in which the teller judged the shampoo story worth telling—a classroom suddenly made aware of the specific dynamics of choice in contemporary liberal democracies -- can alert us to the *tertium comparationis*, the shared framework, that makes these four cases comparable.

As Groth's introduction observes, an older anthropology undertook comparison in the interest of classification, creating tendentious categories that asserted global hierarchies of civilization and were used to justify global hierarchies of power. The residues of these practices are very much with us, and while theoretical critique is well-established, the practical challenges are being made today on the streets of Western cities as old statues come down and the foundation of institutions are brought into question. These residual hierarchies continue to inform both the international encounters described in this issue's first two articles and the modalities of ranking and measuring that inflect the second two.

This issue's concern with subjectivities might also send us back to a different conversation in an older anthropology, where everyday practices of comparison were also addressed, if not described as such. I am thinking of the preoccupation with envy in postwar Mediterraneanist anthropology and peasant studies (e.g., Foster 1972); envy remains a prominent phenomenon in communities formed in scarce-resource conditions or competing in the present for rival goods of connection or visibility. Envy develops, along with suspicion, when one member of a peer group is seen to have access to resources closed off to the others. It presupposes, if not an actual zero-sum situation, at least a context of limitation and stagnation in which the envious actor cannot expect to achieve the same entrée or position held by the actor envied. Envy depends on a sense of peer group, reflecting the negative dimension of what has become a largely positive relationship among Groth's amateur cyclists. A comparison between the self and a more successful peer excites a sense of unfairness and resentment.

There is, to be sure, more dynamism in the interaction between subjective emotions and societal position than these accounts offer us. The Marxist anthropologists of the same period had a different story to tell about peasant communities and the national or colonial frameworks within which they operated. From the top of the social scale, practices of comparison across the great divides of colonial and industrial societies generated the powerful blend of affective stereotype and structural discrimination currently identified as "systemic racism," among other modes of dehumanizing marked actors. Conversely, further down the social scale, upward comparisons stimulated both concerted quests for justice and destructive climates of *ressentiment*.

Still, the individual remains the privileged liberal actor, and it is the transformed position of the individual under global capitalism that our first two articles highlight. Emigration was one great disruptor of the ethos of older peasant societies, with their mix of reciprocity and envy. Today the possibility of mobility—indeed, the disposition toward mobility—has generated new practices of everyday comparison for individuals. Instead of seeing other ways of life as cut off from their own, actors may encounter them as alternative possibilities. This marks a radical change from the early modern "calling"—a stable occupational identity into which individuals were hailed and sorted by virtue of birth and early socialization. Even the subsequent "career"—a forward-leaning term derived from the course on which a race is run—is giving way to a less structured trajectory. Movement from point to point and place to place no longer entails a straight line or a fixed destination; instead, the actor may ramble toward an indistinct horizon that eternally retreats from view.

The Swedish professionals interviewed by Petersson, Böstrom, and Öhlander can be seen as the perfect subjects of globalization: self-maximizing individuals with access to a world of opportunities for improving their skills, making an impact on the world, building a career, and raising a family. They are cosmopolitan a priori, defined as a cohort not by birth or ancestry but by their professional education in Sweden. The Swedish welfare state provides them with a foundation of security that both allows and provokes their pursuit of risk, and it offers a baseline against which they can assess other experiences. This sociocentrism interacts with the global hierarchy of expertise: they move "up" to the US and Germany to learn new techniques or "down" to conflict zones in the global South for philanthropic work. Their explicit comparisons, however, are articulated in a culturalist key that imposes formal equality and equivalence among the practices of nation-states. The Swedes savor the pleasure of being cosmopolitan—recognizing and appreciating different options, mixing and optimizing their own lives. They assess their personal tradeoffs by engaging in intercultural comparison on such questions as family relations and work-life balance. The price of this cosmopolitan mobility is what the authors nicely christen "cultural jet lag" and uneasiness over decisions taken: as a Finnish immigrants' proverb has it, once you've crossed the Atlantic you're always on the wrong side.

To be sure, the Swedish professionals are concerned with being compared as well as comparing. Although their individual choice and agency are foregrounded in this account, a primary motive of their movements is the desire to enhance their credentials and status as they compete for career advancement. The Estonian labor migrants discussed in Siim's article are not dissimilar in their preoccupations, but their position is less advantageous and their constraints are more onerous. They too compare cultural patterns and weigh tradeoffs regarding gender relations, family life, work opportunities as they take the ferry back and forth between Tallinn and Helsinki. But they are more painfully aware than the Swedes of being compared, and not just at the level of individual attainment but as a group of migrants among other migrants: a broad category that bears an ever heavier stigma in a Europe turning against globalization. As Estonians, they have been socialized within a national tradition of self-positioning forced by location on a geopolitical boundary: aligning with Finland against Russia, with the scholarly support of comparative linguistics and anthropology; in the postsocialist period claiming model Nordic or European conduct in comparison to the other Baltic republics. Even for these mobile migrants within the Schengen area, culture is no free marketplace of lifestyle choices but an arena of moralized invidious comparison in which the self is put to the test (cf. Seljamaa 2013).

Accordingly, Siim's Estonian interlocutors are highly sensitive to the power dynamics and rhetorical force of comparison; when typed as undesirable, they deploy defensive comparisons in turn. Like incumbent immigrant communities in the United States distancing themselves from newer or darker-skinned arrivals, the Estonians highlight their integration within Finnish society compared to other migrants, particularly to the highly marked "refugees" but in some cases even to less exemplary fellow Estonians. Still, this very self-consciousness does not afford them security but lays them open to uncanny comparison: the abrupt, unwilling recognition of the familiar within the strange. Resenting their marginalization in Finland despite their best efforts, some recognize a parallel to Estonia's treatment of its much more deeply rooted ethnic Russian population. Such an insight can be brushed off to avoid discomfort or become the foundation of a new critical perspective: both anti-immigrant populisms and solidarity movements arise from this kind of comparison.

Valeska Flor and Stefan Groth turn from the world of mobility and choice to contexts of explicit metrics, ranking, and striving: now actors are less aware of comparing than of being compared. Flor's article considers a scaled-up arena in which not persons or nationalities but nation-states are the objects of comparison; they are similarly understood as singular, responsible agents. The 2015 Paris Agreement on Climate Change created a comparative framework that, in theory, would foster virtuous emulation and the adoption of "best practices" after mutual observation and reflective judgment. Reputational rewards might be accrued by good-faith compliance and the meeting of targets. In practice, as with other intergovernmental agreements demanding short-term sacrifice in a climate of scant trust between actors, comparison has more often been invidious, highlighting failure and, with longer-term comparison of past trajectories, assigning blame for the overall situation. As with the Estonian migrants, nation-states measure themselves defensively against significant others, and a hierarchy takes shape, "from model pupil to sinner." In this case, however, no one is performing well compared to the aspirational standard, so the deflection of responsibility takes priority.

At the activist level, on the other hand, identification trumps comparison: young people across the West do not simply cite Greta Thunberg's example but dress up to look like her.[2] In turn, this solidary platform provides the foundation for an invidious intergenerational comparison, as school strikers attempt to shame their (ir)responsible elders into action

Stefan Groth's article would appear to lower the stakes of the discussion, for he considers ethos at the level of individuals failing to win bike races rather than nation-states failing to secure the planet. Still, a comparison of microcosm and macrocosm does not come amiss, and transformations in the context of play may signal useful movements upstream. Games are, after all, both analytical tools and subjunctive spaces in which scenarios may be played out, informing consequential choices later (Noyes 2016). One has only to look at reality TV in the United States, with its various dramatizations of top-down comparison and zero-sum competition at the bottom, and observe how easily this ludic space has infiltrated the White House. The transformation imagined in Suzanne Collins' 2008 novel *The Hunger Games* feels closer than ever.

By contrast, Groth's amateur cyclists, with access to all the comparative instruments and metrics anyone could wish for, are unconcerned with absolute victory. Rather, they couple the "observing apparatus" to their own observations to achieve a purpose that is also their own: situating their performance goals within the range of a cohort defined by friendship or age grade. Affectively, his cyclists compare the enjoyment of sociable riding in the fresh air with the possibility of a modest personal triumph to the fruitless grind and inappropriate mimicry of striving to emulate the professional standard. If "invidious comparison" and "relative deprivation" among peers were the primary motivators of action in the modern era (Veblen 1899; Runciman 1966), here solidary comparison and relative achievement serve to animate effort.

A suspicious reader will see a failure of autonomy in this "orientation toward the middle." Rephrasing Bourdieu, it might seem these riders have chosen the mediocrity that has already been chosen for them (1984). Bourdieu wrote, however, of a late bourgeois society in which not everyone was expected to win prizes. Today, by contrast, the treadmill of excellence keeps us all running toward the expectation of exceeding expectations. Groth's cyclists choose not to submit to the logic of a game they cannot win. If this stance is also informing the broader life projects of educated young people, as there is some multinational evidence to suggest, then it constitutes a meaningful rebellion against neoliberalism and, in comparison to that dominant logic, can be understood as an ethical choice to embrace the reality principle. Nation-states confronting hard decisions in the face of climate change might take note.

Notes

1 Pace Bourdieu, who argues for giving everyone the opportunity to detach from habitus and ascend into universals (1990). In contrast to much modern theory, modernist aesthetic practice was perhaps clearer in diagnosing the characteristic modern exit from habitus as the reflexivity provoked by the possibility of comparison: see the *Verfremdungseffekt* of Brechtian theatre and the Russian Formalist account of defamiliarization.

2 To be sure, established young activists in the global South cannot help comparing the international visibility of Thunberg to their own.

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